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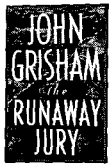

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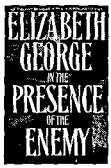

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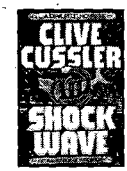

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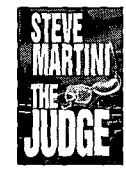

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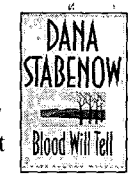

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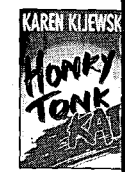

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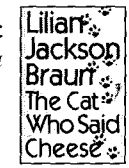

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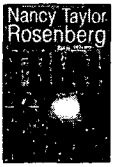

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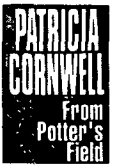

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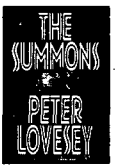

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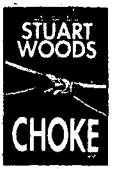

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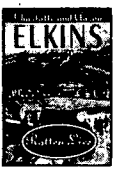

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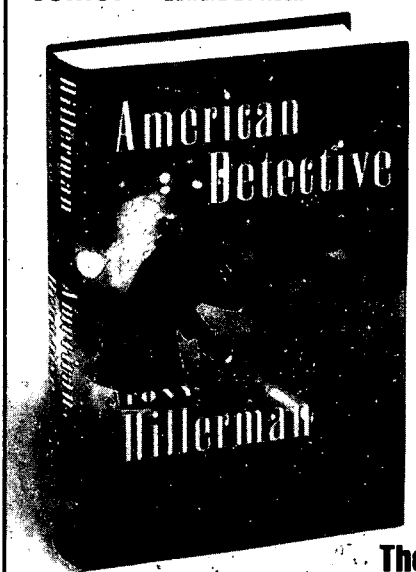

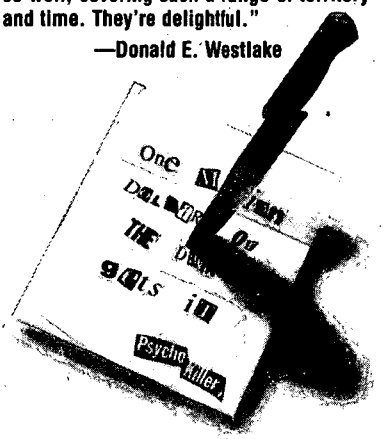

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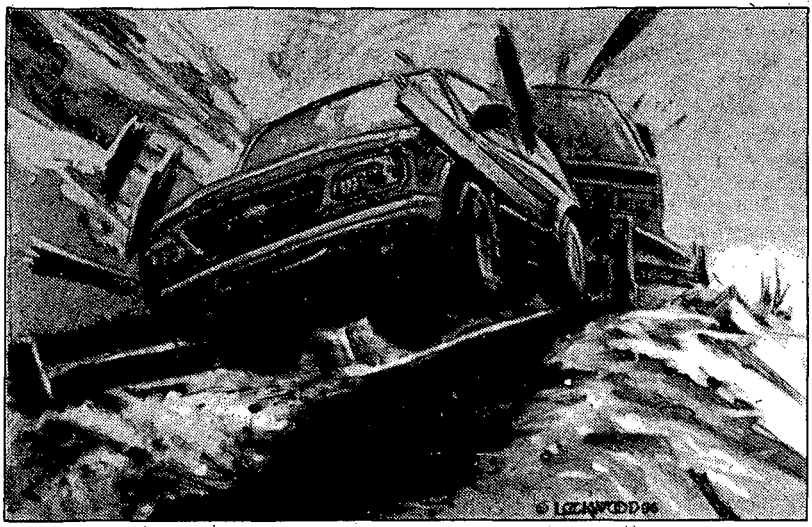

Art by Todd Lockwood

SWITCHBACK

by William Jefferies

On one side was rock, dark as old bone. On the other a drop of a hundred feet.

And in front, a Ford Explorer, Eddie Bauer model, a pleasant navy-blue shade. It cruised down the steep grade, moving slowly. The driver and passenger enjoying the Colorado scenery.

Those were his choices: Rock. Air. Truck.

Pellam jammed his left boot on the emergency brake again. It dropped another notch toward the floor. The pads ground fiercely and slowed the big camper not at all. He was going close to sixty.

He downshifted. Low gear screamed and the box threatened to tear apart. Don't lose the gears, he told himself. He popped the lever back up to D.

Sixty . . . seventy . . .

Air. Rock.

Seventy-five.

Truck.

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A 1995 Readers Award winner, William Jefferies, a.k.a. Jeffery Deaver, returns to *EQMM* with a tale that features a series character from his novels, movie location scout John Pellam. The first of the Pellam novels, *Shallow Graves*, earned Mr. Deaver an Edgar Allan Poe Award nomination in 1993.

Pick one, Pellam thought. His foot cramped as he instinctively shoved the useless brake pedal to the floor again. Five minutes ago, he'd eased the chugging camper over Clement Pass, eight thousand feet up in the Rockies. Admiring the late spring afternoon scenery. There'd been a soft hiss, his foot had gone to the floor, and the Winnebago had started its free fall.

From the tinny boombox on the passenger seat Kathy Mattea sang "Who Turned Out the Light?"

Pellam squinted as he bore down on the truck, honking the horn, flashing his lights to warn the driver out of the way. He caught a glimpse of sunglasses in the Ford's rearview mirror. The driver, wearing a baseball cap, spun around quickly to see how close the camper really was. Then turned back, hands clasped at ten to two on the wheel.

Air, truck . . .

Pellam picked mountain. He eased to the right, thinking maybe he could brush against the rock and scrub oak and pine, slow down enough so that when he went head-on into a tree it wouldn't kill him. Maybe.

But just as he swerved, the driver of the four-by-four instinctively steered in the same direction—to the right, to escape onto the shoulder. Pellam sucked in an "Oh hell" and spun the wheel to the left.

So did the driver of the Ford—like one of those little dances people do trying to get out of each other's way on the sidewalk. Both vehicles swung back to the right then to the left once more as the camper bore down on the blue truck. Pellam chose to stay in the left lane, on the edge of the cliff. The truck veered back to the right. But it was too late; the camper slammed into its rear end. Plastic shrapnel scattered over the asphalt.

The bumpers locked and the impact of the Winnebago goosed their speed up to eighty.

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Pellam looked over the roof of the Ford. He had a fine view of where the road disappeared in a curve a half-mile ahead. If they didn't slow by then the two vehicles were going to sail into space in the finest tradition of hackneyed car-chase scenes.

For a moment the Explorer wiggled out of control then straightened its course.

Seventy miles an hour. A quarter-mile from the curve.

The driver of the truck began to brake. The Ford vibrated powerfully. They slowed a few miles per hour.

Maybe the curve wasn't that sharp. He squinted at a yellow warning sign. The diagram showed a hundred-and-eighty-degree switchback. A smaller sign commanded that thou shalt take the turn at ten miles an hour.

Another squeal of brakes from the Explorer. The camper rode up higher on the bumper. Their speed leveled at seventy.

A thousand feet from the switchback.

Pellam felt the vibrations again. They slowed to sixty-five then sixty. The Explorer's brakes growling. Then smoking.

Five hundred feet.

They'd slowed to fifty.

Danger Sharp Curve

Down to forty-five leisurely miles an hour.

The switchback loomed. Straight ahead, past the curve, Pellam could see nothing. No trees. No mountains. Just a huge empty space. The tourist marker at Clement Pass said the area boasted some of the most spectacular vertical drops in Colorado.

Forty miles an hour. Thirty-nine.

Maybe we'll just bring this one off.

But then the grade dropped, an acute angle, and the wedded vehicles began accelerating. Fifty, fifty-five.

Pellam took off his Ray-Bans. Swept the pens and beer bottles off the dash. Knocked the boombox to the floor. Kathy continued to sing. The song "Grand Canyon" was coming up soon.

A hundred feet from the switchback.

With a huge scream the truck's nose dropped. The driver had locked the brakes in a last desperate attempt to stop. Blue smoke swirled as the four-by-four fishtailed and the rear of the camper swung to the left. But the driver was good. He turned into the skid far enough to control it but not so much that he lost control. They straightened out and kept slowing.

They were fifty feet from the edge of the switchback. The speed had dropped to fifty.

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Forty-five . . .

But it wasn't enough.

Pellam threw his arms over his face, sank down into the seat.

The Explorer sliced through the pointless wooden guardrail and sailed over the edge of the road, the camper just behind.

There was a loud thump as the undercarriage of the truck uprooted a scrub oak, and then a soft jolt. Pellam opened his eyes to find the vehicles rolling down a gentle ten-foot incline, smooth as a driveway, into the parking lot of the Overlook diner, sitting in the middle of a spacious area on an outcropping of rock high above the valley floor.

With a resounding snap the camper's front bumper broke loose and fell beneath the front tires, slicing through and flattening them. The Explorer rolled leisurely through the lot and steered out of the way of the Winnebago, which hobbled on, slowing, toward the rear of the diner.

Pellam's laughter at the peaceful conclusion to the near-tragedy vanished as the camper's nose came to rest, with a hollow *thonk,* against a large propane tank, which probably would've nuked him instantly if he'd gone off the road any faster.

He lowered his head and inhaled deeply for a moment. He climbed out, started for the Explorer.

The driver put the truck in park and shut off the engine.

Pellam rehearsed, *What can I say, mister? You hadn't been there, I'd've gone right through that diner.*

The door opened.

I'll pay you for . . .

She was in her early thirties. A heart-shaped face, chestnut hair, eyebrows thick and dark and, for some reason, wildly sensual. The passenger side door opened and a young man—skinny, with an anemic goatee—climbed out. A cautious smile on his face.

Pellam continued toward the driver.

The crest of her baseball cap read: *Vail.* She took off her own Ray-Bans.

He was thinking that hers were the palest, most piercing gray eyes he'd ever seen when she drew back and decked him with a solid right to the jaw.

Inside the diner the sheriff stood near the counter, talking with the driver.

Pellam worked his mouth painfully and paid neither of them any attention. He was mad at himself. He'd been in more fights

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than he could—or cared to—count. He'd seen the squint in her eyes as he stepped close and had known that she was about to swing. While Pellam kept grinning like a freshman on a first date.

For Chrissake, you might've ducked at least.

The fist had glanced off bone and hadn't caused any serious damage. It loosened a tooth and laid open some skin. A young woman medic was applying a bandage as Pellam reclined on a spongy vinyl booth bench the color of arterial blood.

"She got you good," offered the medic.

"I fell."

"Uhn," she grunted.

"No really. Slipped on the brake fluid. It's leaking. Really."

The driver stood with her arms crossed. She'd taken her hat off; her blond hair was tied back in a severe ponytail. The beige-uniformed sheriff was an unsmiling man of about fifty. Probably the only peace officer in whatever town this was—Pellam had passed a welcome-to sign but that had been just as the emergency brake pad had pungently melted and he hadn't had the inclination to check out the name and population of the place where he was about to die.

As the sheriff jotted in a small notebook Pellam studied the woman. She was calm now and he thought how beautiful she looked.

Pale eyes, dark eyebrows.

She and the sheriff stood next to the cash register, an old-time hand-crank model. The diner was a real relic. Aluminum trim, paint-spatter Formica countertops, black-and-white linoleum diamonds on the floor.

The man who'd been in the passenger seat of the Ford stepped out of the washroom. The slight young man, still wearing a cautious smile, was dressed in dark, baggy clothes—the sort you'd see in TriBeCa or on Melrose in West Hollywood. Pellam—for whom the line between movies and reality was always a little hazy—thought immediately that he could have stepped right out of a Quentin Tarantino flick. He laughed nervously. To Pellam he nodded a rueful glance—the sort soldiers might exchange when they've just survived their first firefight. His hair was cut flat on the top, short on the sides—the kind of cut Pellam associated with characters in the comic books of his childhood; he mentally dubbed the man Butch.

Was she his wife? Girlfriend, sister? She didn't wear a wedding ring and was easily ten years older.

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Pellam rose unsteadily and walked toward them.

The driver took a deep breath. Pellam noticed that her hands were shaking. "Look," she said. "I'm sorry I hit you. I wasn't thinking. . . . The truck was a present. Just last week. It's got six hundred miles on it. I guess I just kind of lost it." She said this breathlessly, with a glance toward the sheriff, as if they'd plea-bargained: She'd apologize and he wouldn't arrest her for assault.

" 'S'okay," he said automatically as his tongue poked a loose tooth. "I didn't really get the impression you were out for blood."

"I thought it was all over," Butch offered, hugging a leather backpack. He gave his little laugh and sounded oddly enthusiastic. "I thought we'd bought the big one. Man!"

"I tried to get around you," Pellam said to the driver.

"I know you did. I . . . I'm sorry." Pale eyes but a great tan. Dark and rich, without a single crow's foot to show for it. Butch was white as cloud.

"Man, that was an experience," the young man continued breathlessly. "What a rush."

The sheriff examined Pellam closely. "You been drinking, mister?"

Welcome to . . .

Gurney.

The name of the town was on the sheriff's shoulder badge.

Hell of a name for a place. Wasn't it some kind of stretcher?

"Brakes went."

"So you say. Didn't answer my question."

"See for yourself. There's brake fluid all over the place out there. Only be careful. It's damn slippery."

"You been *drinking?"*

Pellam could see that the sheriff didn't want any of this. Strangers, accidents, disruptions. He seemed more put out than he ought to be. Pellam couldn't figure out why.

"No. Last drink I had was a beer. . . ."

"Sure it wasn't two?" the law enforcer asked wryly.

"How's that?"

" 'S'all anybody ever drinks. Two beers. A fella'll tank down a fifth of Old Crow and when we pull him outa the wreck he says he's only had two beers. What they always say. Now, how many'd you really have?"

"It was one beer and it was yesterday."

"Hokay. We'll just have you breathe into our little magic box. You object to that?"

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"Not at all."

"He didn't seem drunk," Butch said tentatively. It was a Land's End knapsack. He kneaded it with long fingers that could have used a good scrubbing.

"Don't matter what he seemed to you. We'll let science string him up. Or not. As the case may be."

Butch looked at an expensive watch. He seemed to consider saying something else but kept silent. Pellam rocked closer to the woman and detected a smell of dry perfume. Her white blouse had a gold chain design on it and seemed to be silk. The stone-washed jeans fit perfectly and had razor creases in them.

Butch shifted uneasily and cast a glance toward the driver. She caught his eye and said to the sheriff, "Can we just exchange insurance companies and get on our way?"

"Nope. Everybody pull out some tickets for me."

Butch sighed. "Look, I had nothing to do with this. Why do you want to see my license?"

"Why *don't* you want me to?"

He came up short for a moment then said, "You can't just demand identification. We're not a dictatorship."

The sheriff chuckled. "Give you ten seconds."

A moment's pause then Butch dug into his wallet. Pellam saw that it was a Massachusetts ticket. Randy was his real name.

"Don't look much like you," the sheriff said, examining the license.

"I had a beard then." Pointing to the picture. "And long hair."

"Can see that. I ain't blind. Still don't look like you."

"Look," Randy said. "I *have* to get to Hamlin."

The sheriff ignored him and sat down on a red-vinyl-covered stool to record the information.

Hannah—Pellam had glanced at her license too—sighed. She was embarrassed. "I'm sorry," she said to Randy in a placating way.

Randy shook his head. "Not your fault." There was a formality between the two of them. Pellam couldn't figure out their relationship. She had a Colorado license. Was he a distant relative? Randy's concern for whatever was awaiting him in Hamlin faded. He was in his enthusiastic mode again. Another laugh, as he looked around. "This place is something. A real diner. Man, it's like we're back in an old *Twilight Zone.*"

"Flashback," Pellam said and held up two fingers. Peace.

Randy didn't get it, but his attention was now elsewhere—on

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one of the waitresses. The younger of the two, a slim woman in a tight-fitting white uniform. Rita, if the scripty typeface above her left breast was accurate. Randy brushed his fingers over his hair and looked at his gold hunk of a watch again. He walked to the counter, offered her a smile, and ordered coffee. Saying how 'bout this diner, isn't it totally *authentic?* Man, a real piece of America? She glanced at him as if he'd told her he'd just seen Elvis mountain biking through the pines and went off silently to pour his coffee.

Pellam said to the driver. "I'm John Pellam. This isn't a line—but I have to say I've never met a Hannah before."

Her lips, pale as her eyes, curled up slightly. "How'd you know my name?"

"Saw your license. Interesting name. Pretty."

"It's a palindrome. My name."

"A . . . ?"

"Something that's spelled the same backwards and forwards. 'Madam, I'm Adam,'" Randy called from the counter, his eyes on Rita. She wasn't impressed. "I wrote an entire poem in palindromes once." Rita slung a stack of dishes onto the busboy's tray. Randy'd have to learn that figures of speech aren't the way to a cowgirl's heart.

"It's Henrietta, really," she continued to Pellam. "But I go by Hannah." There must have been a story about the nickname, but she obviously wasn't inclined to tell him at the moment. "That's Randy . . ." She called to him, "I'm sorry, I don't remember your last name."

More relationship mystery. "Wayne," he said. "As in the Duke." He smiled at the waitress once more but she was pointedly ignoring him. He snagged his backpack from the floor and began digging through it.

Not looking up, the sheriff said, "Billings? You're Ed Billings's wife?"

"That's right. You know Ed?"

"Know 'bout him." From the tone, Pellam couldn't guess whether Ed was a philanthropist or a molester.

She turned to Pellam. "My husband gave me the truck for my birthday last week. That's why I lost my temper."

The sheriff grunted as he finished writing down vitals from the licenses. He walked outside, gesturing Pellam after him, had him exhale into the portable Breathalyzer. "You're clean," the law officer

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muttered, in the same accusing voice he'd probably have used if Pellam's blood alcohol had been point two.

When they returned to the diner he announced gruffly, "Not writing anybody up. Oughta, but I'm not gonna."

"That mean we can get going?" Randy asked, tossing some money down on the counter. Pellam noticed that he hadn't taken more than a sip of the coffee.

Licenses and registrations were redistributed. Except Pellam's. The sheriff thumbed it slowly. "What's this about you making movies here?"

When the sheriff had checked the VIN on the Winnebago's dash he must have seen the Denver Film Board's location permit.

"What?" Hannah asked, grinning like a schoolgirl. Pellam got this a lot. He wondered if she'd ask for a walk-on part.

"I'm a location scout. I've been hunting down some exteriors for the last few scenes of a film they're going to shoot here in a couple of months. Most of the movie's set in Denver."

"You're a ways from there," the sheriff muttered. "How come that?"

"Couldn't find anything I liked closer in. Came across this place east of here fifteen miles or so. What's it called? Devil's . . ."

"Playground," Hannah said, shaking her head. "Be a good setting for a Stephen King movie, that's about all."

She was right about that. The place was nestled at the base of two mountains, a huge craggy plain of pits and arroyos. Bleak as could be. But extremely photogenic. Pellam had planned to talk the director out of setting the film's final scenes on a conventional peak and convince him to shoot in that surreal wasteland.

"Hey, Hube, you own some land up near there, don't you?" the young waitress piped up. The sheriff grunted an unintelligible response.

Rita continued to Pellam, "There was talk of developing some land up there for gambling. Our sheriff may be the rich boy in town some day."

"Yeah," the sheriff mumbled. "I'm lucky, my grandkids'll get some money on the deal. Now if—"

"Never can tell," the girl continued enthusiastically. "I heard about some mysterious fellow buying up land—"

Sheriff Werther said gruffly, "Hey, official business here. You mind?"

She turned cold eyes on him and tossed more bulletproof dishes into the tray.

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"It's getting late," Hannah said. "We've got to get all the way to Hamlin, and Ed and I have some people coming over for dinner tonight."

"Oh, you're not leaving," the sheriff said.

"How's that?" she asked.

"You aren't driving nowhere without lights."

Hannah laughed. "You're kidding. It's still daylight."

"No brake light, no turn signals. No backup. We'll cite you. Yep, we will."

"But—"

"Don't care, Mrs. Billings. That's the way it is. Get it fixed or stay here till you do."

She turned to Randy. He'd given up consulting his watch but his anxiety was growing. "Look, is there a bus station here?"

"In Gurney? Not since . . . Musta been the fifties."

"Cab?"

Several patrons laughed.

"I'm going to Berkeley. I've got a reservation on the Amtrak leaving Hamlin at eleven tonight. I can't miss that train."

Berkeley? Pellam gave up trying to figure out the relationship. A Generation-X poet in the middle of cowboy country with a vital appointment at a radical school. Go figure.

"Randy was hitchhiking," Hannah explained to the sheriff. "The Explorer had a flat and Randy fixed it for me. I told him I'd drive him to Hamlin to get the train."

"You got money for the bus, why're you hitchin'?" the sheriff asked. Pellam remembered seeing a wad in the young man's wallet.

"The experience of it." He gave his enthusiastic little laugh again. "I'd hitch all the way if I had time. I mean, the whole point of life is experience. Right?"

"You say so. You ain't thumbing on the interstate, are you?"

"Ramps only," Randy said automatically. He'd been through this before.

"There a mechanic around here?" Pellam asked the sheriff.

"Betcha. Rudy's. 'Bout four blocks thataway."

"That the only shop in town?"

"Yep. Rudy's is." The sheriff gave him the phone number from memory.

Pellam asked, "He by any chance related to you?"

"Hah, that's funny." The sheriff's smile turned cold. "You got a mouth on you. No wonder she knocked you on your butt."

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It was the brake fluid, Pellam thought. But said nothing.

Forty minutes later Pellam was sitting in the office of Rudy's, the garage with the world's most beautiful view. The windows looked out over the Rockies and now, late afternoon, the peaks were lit brilliantly, the stunning light firing off the late spring snowcap.

Hannah pushed through the door and paused, staring at the view. "I've lived here seven years and I never get tired of looking at mountains."

"They are something, aren't they?"

She flopped down in a cracked fiberglass chair. "I just left a message for Ed. I told him I had to stop and replace a bulb in the truck."

"One bulb?"

She nodded. "I'll call him back in a while and tell him actually it's two bulbs. Eventually I'll work up to telling him I decided to replace the whole rear end."

They laughed. Pellam asked, "He going to go ballistic?"

"Ed?" She scoffed. "Naw, he's not like that. Of course, next birthday he's probably going to get me a Dustbuster or blender."

"Where's Butch?" Pellam asked.

"Who?"

"Randy."

"Haven't seen him. I stopped to call Ed and the last I saw he was headed for this little park in the middle of town. He wanted to write a poem."

"A poem? He's serious about that?"

"Started talking to himself about some woman," Hannah continued. "Said he'd felt inspired by the experience of being out here. In a small Western town."

Experience. Okay.

Rudy—who proudly admitted to being the sheriff's brother-in-law—was outside examining the camper and the four-by-four. A few minutes later the huge, bearded mechanic lumbered into the office, rearranging the grease on his fingers with a filthy rag.

"*Damn* shame 'bout that Explorer. Needin' bodywork when you can still smell the new leather. That's always the way, ain't it?"

Rudy told Pellam his estimate would take another hour or two. He then explained to Hannah that working all the housing screws out of the lamp receptacles and then unscrewing and replacing the shattered lenses and bulbs would be a major chore and would

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cost four hundred ten dollars. His voice faded when she stepped forward. She reached up and slipped off the Vail cap.

Watch out, Rudy. Pellam stepped back.

Hannah eyed him icily. "Let's think this through."

"How's that?"

She continued patiently. "You can get bulbs for six bucks a pop at NAPA, cheaper at Wal-Mart. I need four of them. The lenses? Let's be generous. Fifty bucks each. Just need two. That's a grand total of one twenty-four in parts. Labor? You loosen one screw in each housing and then it's a friction pullout. Now, the bulbs *aren't* screw-mount, they're bayonet. You put a glove on. Right? Stick your finger into the broken base and push and twist. You can do all four in a minute or two."

Rudy's face had gone red beneath the smudges. "Well, I meant 'screw,' you know, in a like general sense."

"I'm sure you did," Hannah muttered. "So you're basically charging me four hundred dollars for thirty minutes' work. That's eight hundred dollars an hour."

Silence.

"I have overhead," was the only defense Rudy could mount.

More silence. From beneath her dark, silken eyebrows, she looked up into his evasive eyes.

"Two fifty," he muttered.

"One fifty."

"Two fifty."

"One fifty," Hannah said cheerfully.

"Okay. Jesus." The mechanic sullenly retreated into his garage to start the work.

Pellam glanced at the Winnebago. He had no talent whatsoever when it came to motor vehicles, except for the uncanny ability to attract state troopers when he was speeding. Rudy was going to hose him. Maybe he should have Hannah go over the estimate.

He bought a vending machine coffee and a Moon Pie. She laughed at the haute cuisine and took the offered change from his palm, bought a Diet Pepsi.

"You really picked that fellow up?" Pellam asked her after a moment. "I clock a hundred thousand miles a year but I never pick up hitchers."

"Even pretty women?"

"Especially them. Though I'd make an exception in your case. Only 'cause you saved my life though."

She chose not to flirt back. "I normally wouldn't think of it. Ed's

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told me some horror stories. But you saw Randy. He's about as harmless as they come."

"Still could be pretty dangerous. What if he started reciting poetry at you?"

"That's a felony in Colorado. You can use deadly force to protect yourself. If it rhymes."

Pellam glanced up the street. "What's the deal about Berkeley? He a student? Looks like he ought to be in a grunge band."

"He was a little vague. But no, I don't think he's a student. Maybe he's one of those wunderkind professors. I didn't really understand half of what he was saying."

"You're going to drive him to, where is it? Hamlin?"

" 'Bout a half-hour away."

"Tell you what," Pellam said. "I feel I know you intimately—playing matchmaker with our insurance companies and all. How 'bout if I ride along with you?"

"Are you still flirting with me? Or are you being chivalrous?"

"Yes," Pellam said.

Their eyes met for a moment. Finally she said, "Ed's a wonderful guy. We've been married for seven years, we've never had a fight that lasted more than five minutes. And I don't cheat on him. Ever."

"You missed the most important thing of all."

"What's that?"

"He got you a whole truck for your birthday and I'm only buying you a new bumper. He's the obvious choice."

She smiled. Didn't want to but couldn't help it. "Everything clear? Good. Then, sure, I'd enjoy your company."

Pellam was offering her a bite of Moon Pie when he heard a car pull up behind them. He didn't pay it any attention until Hannah's eyes grew cautious. Then startled. He turned to see Sheriff Hubert Werther storming up to him.

"All right, mister, where you been?"

"How's that?"

"Don't want no innocent crap. Where the hell you been the last hour?" The sheriff's hand was on the well-worn butt of his pistol. Pellam tossed the snack into an oil drum. You lose a lot of credibility with a half-eaten Moon Pie melting in your fingers.

"Why?"

"Just answer me."

"Here," Pellam said, gesturing at the filthy waiting room.

"Hey, Rudy, this fella been here for the past hour, give'r'take?"

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The mechanic looked into Pellam's face for a moment. "Nope."

"Wait a minute," Pellam began. "I—"

"Got here but twenty minutes ago."

"What exactly is going on?" Hannah asked.

"Rita Hanson—that waitress at the Overlook—was setting out the trash. Somebody throws a garbage bag over her head and hits her with a two-by-four. Then he drug her into the bushes. Got her half undressed 'fore she managed to tear a hole in the bag and started hollerin'."

Pellam let out an exasperated sigh. "You accusing me of attempted rape?"

"I'm saying Gurney ain't had nothing but a vehicular felony in five years till this. Just after you three come waltzing into town. That's a funny coincidence."

"Oh, come on—"

"I know every soul for ten miles 'round and none of 'em's inclined that way. Even the worst cutups we got."

"So you're roundin' up all the strangers?"

"Where's that other fella?"

"Randy?" Pellam laughed. "The poet? You can't suspect him."

"How come is it you never seem to answer my questions straight off?" Werther's hands were on his hips now, but his right still wasn't very far from the pistol. "Now, where's that frienda yours?"

"He was in that little park downtown," Hannah said.

"And where were you? 'Fore you got here?" Pointing a tobacco-stained finger at Pellam.

"I looked in some stores, made a phone call to my director in California. Walked back to the diner, watched the tow-truck guy hook up the camper. Came here."

"So you *was* back at the diner? Anybody see you?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"How is she?" Hannah asked. "The woman?"

"Be all right. Bandaged her up, sent her home to bed. Now, I'm going to look for your friend. You all stay put. And I mean no foolin'."

He flopped down into the front seat of his cruiser and drove off, scattering gravel behind the cruiser in great roostertails.

"Jesus," Pellam muttered.

"It's terrible that girl got hurt," Hannah said. "But I don't see why he's hassling us about it."

"Small towns," Pellam said, as if it explained everything, and he supposed that maybe it did.

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"You want to get a drink?" He nodded toward a tavern across the street.

"I've got to get to Marty's before it closes. It's the reason I came to town in the first place."

Pellam had passed Marty's. A store selling women's clothing. Country western mostly.

"Meet you here in a half-hour?"

"If I'm not here," Pellam said, "look for me in the lockup."

He caught a glimpse of her pale eyes, her dark eyebrows, and a smile as she swung into the truck—flirtatiously, he thought. She drove off toward Main Street.

He walked around the back of the garage, sat on the hood of a wheelless '74 Gremlin, painted an iridescent green that existed nowhere in nature. He sipped the dregs of his coffee and looked out over the mountains, the dry arroyos, the sagebrush.

A palindrome.

Madam, I'm Adam. . . .

Pellam pitched the coffee cup onto a trash pile and lay back on the spidered windshield.

An hour later Hannah still hadn't returned.

Twenty minutes after that Pellam called Marty's. He was told that Mrs. Billings had been in but she'd left forty-five minutes ago.

Pellam called the sheriff's office. Hubert Werther wasn't in. He hung up without leaving a message and walked back to Main Street.

Marty's turned out to be oddly upscale. The jeans and blouses, fringed leather jackets, Stetsons, and bolo ties were expensive. The place was just closing. Pellam explained to the young woman clerk that he'd just called about Hannah Billings. "You still haven't seen her?"

"Nosir." The young girl nervously rubbed her nose with a pudgy finger.

"And you've got no idea where she went?"

"No. Maybe that guy knows."

"Guy?"

"The guy she met outside."

"Could you describe him?"

She did. It was Randy.

"He was with her?"

"No. He came up just as she was leaving."

"You know what they said?"

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"All I know is that she wasn't too happy to see him, looked like. What's all this about, mister?"

It was then that he heard the siren. He hurried outside into the deserted, wind-blown street. The sheriff's car spun around a corner, headed straight past him, bounded up over the curb, and skidded to a stop at the end of Marty's parking lot.

Oh hell . . .

Pellam started to run.

Across the parking lot and past the cruiser.

To where Hannah lay.

She was slumped on the floor of a phone booth in front of a nearby convenience store, one leg extended into the dirt and grass outside the booth. Her face pale, eyes wet with tears. The receiver swung like a slow pendulum. It was covered with her blood. Another siren sounded and the fire-department ambulance jumped the curb and squealed to a stop near them.

Werther and Pellam got to her at the same time. There was a moment's pause as the sheriff froze, hand dropping to his sidearm.

"For God's sake," Pellam muttered. "It wasn't me."

The sheriff hesitated, then nodded toward her, and he and Pellam together eased her out of the phone booth, as the medics ran up. They rested her gently on the stretcher.

Blood covered her white blouse, streaming down her neck from the wound on the side of her head. "It was him. Randy . . ." She fell into a crying jag and sobbed until she choked.

It took some time to clean the wound. By the time the medics were done, Hannah'd calmed down. She explained what had happened. Randy'd been waiting for her at the clothing store. He'd seemed very agitated and insisted that they leave for Hamlin right away. She told him the sheriff had wanted them to stay. He'd gotten upset at that and started cross-examining her about what Werther had wanted, what he'd asked.

"All I could think about was the woman at the diner. I knew he'd done it."

Pellam remembered the way the man had stared at the young waitress, his eyes coursing over her white uniform. And how she'd snubbed him.

"He said we had to leave. I hesitated and he sort of snapped. He grabbed the keys and shouted for me to get in the truck."

She'd started to run and he'd lunged for her. She fell heavily and hit her head on a rock. The next thing she knew the truck

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was racing out of the parking lot. Hannah had passed out and when she came to crawled to the convenience store to call 911.

"You were here in seconds," she said to Werther.

"I was right up the street," the sheriff said. "Looking for that boy, matter of fact."

The medic pronounced her all right—no evidence of concussion. She'd recovered enough so that her biggest concern was now her outfit. She slipped into the convenience store's washroom to put on her new clothes—a blue blouse and black jeans.

The sheriff called the state police and had roadblocks set up. "Good thing 'bout Gurney is there's only one road in and out. That fella can't get very far 'less he's a mountain climber."

Then the sheriff noticed something. He wandered to a clump of sagebrush and returned. "Looks like our boy had a toad-sticker on him," Werther muttered, carrying a long hunting knife. Pellam wanted to tell him to look out for fingerprints—his most recent film had been a detective thriller—but he supposed the evidence against Randy was strong enough at this point that a few misplaced prints wouldn't matter.

Hannah stared at the wicked-looking knife in dismay. "Never again," she whispered. "I'm never picking up anybody ever again."

"Wonder whose this is?" Werther pointed to dried blood on the blade.

Hannah's head swiveled from right to left in panic, staring at the bushes, the trees, the rocky crags in the low hills nearby. As if Randy were stalking them at that moment.

The point of life is experience . . .

"Listen here," Sheriff Werther said. " 'Fraid I'm going to have to ask you two to stay round here for a bit."

"What?" Hannah asked.

"State police'll wanta get your statements. They'll be here in a coupla hours."

Hannah looked around once more. "But—"

"Gotta insist," Werther said coolly. "Now, you might wanta get yourself indoors till they get here."

Pellam suggested that they hole up in his Winnebago. For the first time that day he wasn't flirting.

Drinking instant coffee.

Hannah was telling Pellam about life on their huge ranch, her birthday party last week, about Denver society, about growing up

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in Texas. She was rambling a little, trying to keep her mind off what had happened, he guessed.

A sharp rap on the door.

Pellam opened a small compartment beside the door. Slipped his hand into it. He looked outside. Then closed the compartment. He let Werther in. "Here's what's going on. He's still around town, we think. We ain't heard nothing from the state boys on the roadblocks and he couldn't've driven outa the county that fast."

"What else?" Pellam asked. The sheriff's face revealed that there was something more to tell them.

"The troopers were setting up a roadblock near Devil's Playground. And they found a body. White male, naked. Murdered. With a knife. Been dead about six, eight hours. That's just before you picked Randy up, Mrs. Billings. That's why he was so eager to get outa here."

Pellam felt pressure on his arm. Hannah's fingers dug into him.

"He's a killer," she whispered. "He was sitting right next to me the whole time."

"I'm thinking," the sheriff said, "you both better come back to the police station."

Hannah nodded.

Pellam told her, "You go on. I'll meet you there. I've got to make some phone calls."

She squeezed his arm again.

"It'll be all right," he told her. Hoping he sounded more confident to her than he did to himself.

When Hannah and the sheriff left, Pellam walked to the door of the camper and opened the tiny compartment beside it. He took out the Colt Peacemaker and loaded it, five shells, then lowered the single-action hammer down on the empty chamber.

Then he closed the blinds but left the lights on, unlocked the door, and sat back. Tried to relax. Didn't come close, of course.

Because he knew that it was Pellam himself that Randy was on his way back for. He was the main reason—not any roadblocks—that the man hadn't fled Gurney.

Pellam—with his bad brakes—had been the twist of fate that ruined his getaway. If not for him, Randy'd be safely on his way to Berkeley or Anchorage or Mexico City by now.

He thought of the eerie smile.

He thought of the filthy hands and evasive eyes.

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He thought of Rita Hanson. Attacked because she'd rejected the young man, had ruined his fantasy.

Payback.

Pellam lifted the gun to his face. Felt the cold metal, smelled the sweet, lightweight gun oil. How long would he have to wait? he wondered. Only long enough for Randy to steal another knife and find his way to the camper, probably.

He was right about the timing—it was only ten minutes later that the attack came. But he was dead wrong about Randy's choice of weapons. He heard a snap of branch outside, then a soft *whoosh,* and then the gasoline bomb flew through the side window of the camper and exploded in a splash of rich blue flame.

A fiery tentacle shot out toward Pellam, caught him on the arm as he dove for the floor. His sleeve ignited. He panicked for a moment then rolled on top of the burning cloth, extinguishing the flames.

The fire spread instantly through the Winnebago, consuming the interior walls, the woodwork, the carpet. A massive roar filled the small space as a twister of orange flame and black smoke swept toward Pellam. He managed to grab the video camera, two of his recent cassettes, his precious location catalogues compiled over the years, and a canvas bag of some other important possessions. He leapt through the front door and rolled onto the ground as the flames swept over the driver's seat. He could see the flames consume his antique movie poster of *Shane.* A fan letter from Martin Scorsese — from Pellam's directing days. His favorite poster, Abel Gance's *Napoleon.*

A moment later the propane tank went up with a hissing bang that sent a piece of steel shrapnel whistling past his head. His only injury was a cut thumb from the hammer of the Colt as he crouched, cocking the weapon and aiming it into the thick woods where Randy must have been hiding when he threw the bomb.

As the camper burned to the ground Rudy ran up, wheezing hard and blasting the flames pointlessly with a big red fire extinguisher. Pellam ignored the man's panicked shouts and stalked carefully through the forest. There were a few smudged footprints leading north and—since that was all he had to go on—Pellam followed them.

He continued for a quarter of a mile then broke into a clearing. Before him was an abandoned quarry, several hundred feet deep, the low sun painting the sheer walls fiery orange while swirls of rainbow colors danced off the water filling the massive pit.

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Pellam noted the scarred ground: recent treadmarks leading off the dirt road. He also saw caverns big enough to hide a truck, and rusted chain-link fences, posted with dozens of warning signs to keep strangers away. A perfect hiding place.

He heard a loon's hopeless cry. A semi's exhaust coughing in the distance. And from downtown Gurney, a half-dozen gunshots.

She was all right.

But just barely.

Randy hadn't returned to the quarry after the firebomb attack but had gone after Hannah next. In the sheriff's office itself. Dumb luck had saved her.

She, Pellam, and Werther stood in a cluster, staring down at the bloody body of Jimmy, the young deputy, face down on the floor.

She'd been in the back room, she told Pellam, changing the bandage on her head. She hadn't seen what happened, but Randy apparently had rushed into the sheriff's office, grabbed the deputy's gun, and shot him in the chest, then the head. When she'd heard the shots she locked the door fast. Randy tried to kick it in but the wood had held and he'd fired a number of shots through the door, missing her—in the case of one bullet, by an inch—and then fled.

Sheriff Werther explained that he'd been just up the street. He'd come running, but Randy was gone.

Pellam slipped his arms around her quivering shoulders, eased her into a chair. She shuddered as she glanced once at the young deputy's body, the spreading oval of blood. Pellam told them about the firebomb.

"I heard that call," the sheriff grumbled, his eyes still on the body. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I think I know," Pellam said. "I thought at first Randy was out for blood because I ruined his getaway after he killed that guy at Devil's Playground. But then I got to wondering if there was more to it. I think maybe I got him on tape there—when I was shooting that footage. He wanted to destroy the evidence."

"*Did* he burn it up?" the sheriff asked.

"I managed to save a couple of my most recent tapes. I don't know what was on them. I hid them in the woods behind Rudy's."

The sheriff walked to the windows. "And he's still out there somewhere." He grimaced again, nodded toward the deputy. "I'll get a blanket."

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When he'd stepped into the back room Pellam stood up. He said to Hannah:

"Tell him I'll be back in a half-hour."

"Where're you going?"

"I'm going to get him."

"That's the sheriff's job."

"Werther? He's twice Randy's age. He's no match for him."

"And you are? Let's wait for the state police."

"Hannah, he's crazy. He's coming after us. Me and you. Maybe half the town. He's killed a cop. What's he got to lose?"

"But he's got a gun now."

Pellam pulled the Colt Peacemaker out of his belt.

She stared at the dull barrel for a moment. "But how do you even know where he is?"

"There's an old quarry a quarter-mile north of here. I think he hid the Explorer in one of the caves."

"But, Pellam—"

"I don't want anything to happen to you. Go check into that motel. Use a fake name. Pay cash."

She began to say something but he kissed her on the cheek, pressed his palm to the back of her head. His lips lingered for a moment. Long enough to get the message across. Not so long that he'd offend anybody.

Even Ed.

An hour later Hubert Werther slipped away from the Gurney sheriff's office, leaving the state troopers to finish up the crime-scene work. He pulled on his padded green jacket, the one that made him look like a forest ranger. It was cold tonight. Colorado's a desert state at heart and nights are always chill.

He drove down Maple Street. He paused at the smoking ruins of Pellam's camper and asked Earle Boomer, the fire chief, if the area was safe. Werther cut off Earle's overlong explanation, which boiled down to yes it was safe, and drove on. He parked not far from the site of the fire, which happened also to be near the Gurney Inn, where Hannah Billings had gotten a room.

Walking softly, Werther made his way toward the dimly lit motel. He paused twice, both times wiping his palms on his khaki slacks. They were sweating profusely even though the temperature couldn't have been over fifty.

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Eerie as hell.

Devil's Playground had been plenty spooky but the Gurney Quarry at night ran a close second.

Of course some of that might have to do with the fact that there was a killer wandering around here. There'd been one at the Playground too, it seemed, but he hadn't known it. That made a big difference.

He'd recalled the austere beauty of the place earlier in the day, the chalky bone-white cliffs, the turquoise water, the sensual curves of the black shadows of the caverns.

Now it was merely a maze of hiding places and traps. He decided it was too dangerous to go searching. So he played bait. Pellam set the lantern he'd borrowed from Rudy about ten yards away and sat down in a notch of rock, where he was protected from the wind that howled mournfully over the landscape.

Thinking about Randy. Sheriff Werther. And about Hannah. He thought about Ed some too. He sat for ten minutes, nervously thumbing the hammer of the Colt and not hearing a single boot on rock.

An owl swooped low and with a muted squeak snagged something—mouse or chipmunk—then veered off into the sky.

Ten more minutes of quiet.

And then the crack of rock on rock, the patter of falling gravel. Followed by a scrabbling sound that might have been boots on stone.

He doused his light and crawled to a rise. In the distance was the flicker of a flame. It seemed to come from one of the large caverns near the edge of the quarry. The light fluttered and went out. Pellam was on his feet, running toward the cavern where he'd seen it, dodging rocks and scrub oak and wiry balls of tumbleweed.

The cavern was in a cul-de-sac. On one side a sheer wall rose fifty feet into the air, its surface scarred and chopped by the stone cutters. On the other side, the quarry fell into a blackness filled with rocks and water.

It was very dark. There was no moon yet. As he made his way closer to the cavern Pellam smelled the smoke from the fire he'd seen inside. Smelled too the rich, musty scent of the wet limestone, the cold pine air.

He pulled his boots off and continued on the ground silently, ignoring the pain on his soles from the chips of gravel.

He paused and heard nothing other than the wind.

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Twenty feet from the entrance to the cavern.

Moving closer, listening. Moving again. Hell, it was noisy, the wind. Like the slipstream roaring through the window of the Winnebago that afternoon.

Mountain, truck, or air: . . .

He paused, wiped his palm on his jeans, got a grip on the Colt once more.

Pick one.

Pellam eased forward. He got five feet before the cold muzzle of a gun touched the back of his neck.

"Put it down. The gun."

Her voice was huskier than it had been earlier. Maybe it was the chill in the wind. Maybe she'd just been trying to sound like an ingenue all day.

"It's an expensive gun. Can I set it down carefully?"

She grabbed the Colt from his hands, tossed it to the ground then pushed the muzzle of the dead deputy's gun harder against his head.

Hands outstretched, he stood slowly and backed away a few feet, facing her. He guessed that she'd lit a fire, maybe a book of matches, and thrown it in the cavern to catch his attention. Her own bait.

"Where's the tape, Pellam?"

"It's good footage but it's not worth killing somebody over. I'll license it to you for the standard rate—"

"Shut up," she growled. "Where's the goddamn tape?"

He was nodding. "It was *you* I got on camera at Devil's Playground, right? Your truck. Or maybe I caught you doing something you shouldn't've been doing. Like stabbing somebody to death."

He didn't know whether she reacted. It was too dark to see.

Pellam continued, "The body they found there—that was your husband, wasn't it? What did you do, kill him then go looking for a hitchhiker to take the fall?" He laughed grimly. "And you were going to plant the knife on him. With Ed's wallet and watch?"

She ignored him, said evenly, "Of course, maybe I was on the cassette that got burned up."

"Where is Randy, exactly?"

"In which case, I don't have to worry about it. All I have to worry about is killing you."

Though she didn't seem too worried about that at all.

"The waitress? *You* attacked her just to make it look like he was

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the one. Sure . . . All the times you were out of everyone's sight—pretending to call Ed, shopping, that's when she was attacked and Randy supposedly stole your truck."

She didn't nod but she didn't deny it either. Somewhere in the distance a coyote howled.

"Why'd you do it?" he continued. "Ed, I mean?"

"Cheated on me," she said matter-of-factly. Her voice smooth once more. "He was rich. He was a son of a bitch. He bored me."

"You stab him in the back?"

"No, I was looking at him when I did it."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"There is no tape, is there?"

"There was," Pellam said, sighing. "It was one of the ones that melted. A lot of work down the drain, thanks to you. I was also pretty attached to the camper."

She looked around. Lifted the gun.

"Wait—" Pellam began. He could think of nothing else to say.

The gunshot was a soft crack. The bullet dug into the limestone about three feet above Pellam's head and showered them with a cascade of dust and stone fragments.

Hannah gave a raspy scream and turned, lifting the gun toward the unseen attacker. Pellam covered the ground in seconds and grabbed the pistol out of her hand. As she turned back toward him his elbow slammed into her cheek.

Accidentally.

Sort of.

Hannah stumbled back against the cliff face, crying out. The beige silhouette of Sheriff Hubert Werther climbed clumsily down to the clearing.

"Took me longer'n I thought," he wheezed.

"You know she almost shot me," Pellam said to him.

"Aw, you wasn't in any danger. I had her in my sights for the last minute easy. Mighta been a half-minute. But worked out okay. So. Just like you said, Pellam. She checked into the hotel and then left ten minutes later. Took off after you here."

Pellam had called the sheriff after he'd left the office to tell him what he suspected.

Hannah rubbed her cheek and looked from one to the other.

"Tell her. Go ahead, Pellam. She's dying to find out, betcha."

Pellam could see nothing of her pale eyes now. Only the dark crescents of eyebrows. He retrieved the Peacemaker. "What started me wondering was the water in the quarry this afternoon.

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The colors on the surface. It was an oil slick. I remembered that from the time I was a stunt man and drove a 1969 Barracuda—"

"Now *that* was a car," the sheriff offered.

"—into Lake Michigan. Surface of the water looked like a rainbow for hours after. At first, I thought Randy might've driven in accidentally, trying to get away, but the place is plastered with warning signs. And I started wondering if anybody else might've ditched that truck here. And why."

"No, I didn't—"

"Oh, tell her the best part, Pellam." Sheriff Werther chuckled. "I like this."

"You did see me at Devil's Playground. And while I was up in the rocks you crawled under the camper and loosened the brake lines and pads. You know cars. Hell, you know more about 'em than Rudy. But then you stopped to fake the flat tire and get Randy to help you fix it. Make it seem more likely for a woman by herself to give a man a lift. But it took more time than you figured and I caught up with you. We hooked bumpers and ended up at the diner."

"I thought it was pretty far-fetched when he first told me," the sheriff said. "Yep. But then I started wond'rin'. You had Randy fix your flat for you? Crap. That schoolboy probably didn't know a jack from a tire iron."

"We ended up in Gurney," Pellam continued. "I was still alive and had the tape and you still needed somebody to take the fall for Ed's murder. So you had to improvise. In the diner, you'd seen Randy flirting with the waitress and you decided to make him a crazed killer. First Ed, then the waitress, then me. I figured you told him to meet you outside the clothing store and you two drove out to the quarry. Then you knocked him out and drove the truck over the edge of the cliff. You walked back to the parking lot, dropped the knife where it'd be found, and hit yourself with a rock. Then later you pitched the gas bomb into the Winnebago. And at the sheriff's station?"

She stared at the chopped cliff face; to Pellam, it looked like bone. He continued, "The deputy turned his back on you and—"

"Shooting Jimmy . . ." The sheriff was chuckling no longer. "He was a good boy. You're gonna pay for that."

Hannah's voice rose. "You don't understand! He was *cheating* on me! He took his secretary to a hotel on my goddamn birthday! On my *birthday!*"

"That's what we got divorce lawyers for," Sheriff Werther said

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coolly. "In the end, they're cheaper'n weapons. As you're 'bout to find out."

"Who was he?" Pellam asked. "Randy?"

Pouting now. "Just some graduate student. Going to summer school at Berkeley."

"He was really a poet?" Pellam asked.

"I guess."

The sheriff spit a long stream, handcuffed her. "Come on, Mrs. Billings." He led her off, holding her shoulder as much for support on the rocky ground as for the restraint, it seemed.

Colored lights flashed in the distance, growing closer. More police, and trucks to pull the Explorer from the water, Pellam supposed.

He heard her voice, rough again, though he couldn't tell for certain what she was saying.

Hannah.

The same word backwards and forwards.

The wind had picked up. A tumbleweed rolled past and cast itself off the shelf of the cliff into poor Randy's watery grave.

Pellam walked back to Rudy's. He collected the video camera and the tapes, where he'd stashed them behind a dumpster. He glanced at the burned hulk of the Winnebago, whose tires still smoldered. He embarrassed himself nodding a farewell to the vehicle in which he'd logged an easy two hundred thousand miles.

A flash at his feet. Somehow his Kathy Mattea CD had been blown clear of the fire. It was unscathed. He picked it up, slipped it into his shirt pocket, then walked up the road to check into the Gurney Inn. He lay on the bed for a while but couldn't stay still and decided to go for a walk.

It was eleven P.M. when he wandered back to the quarry, examined it in the light of a half moon. It was a great place for the ending of a movie. A thriller, of course. He shot a half-hour's worth of footage—the shadowy caverns, the cliffs bone-white in the moonlight. And the water, no longer turquoise, no longer covered with rainbows, but black as the sky above the slashes of cold mountains. ●

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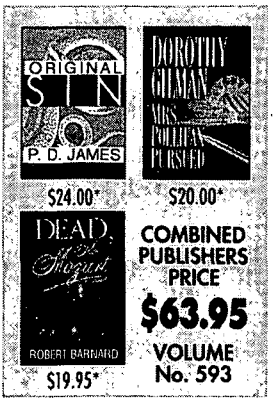

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Bright Hope, Dark Soul

by Kathleen Dougherty

"I know you! I know you!" cries the man called M'Guema. He spins around, surprising a caged spider monkey into shrieks, and leaves the bar. He returns with a book whose tattered, worn cover is quite familiar. Even here, in this African micronation recently split off from another, minor celebrities like myself are known.

In the dim light M'Guema shakes the poetry collection at me and I smell mold spore. A tear in the book jacket has removed the upper right half of my skull. Within that publicity photo, on the shelf just over my shoulder, is a framed shot of Fee. My publicist hated this photo because of that small image of my wife. However, the Pulitzer quieted the publicist, and Fee's face — horsey, with a jaw that should defy human anatomy, with blue eyes that droop at the outside corners like the sad eyes of a basset hound, thinning brown hair wispy as spun glass — her face has been on every book of poetry since then.

She is my heart.

Seated across from me, Fee slumps, her eyes closed. This gloomy bar can't hide her drawn features, a bone-deep weariness that I am in part responsible for.

M'Guema pushes the book at me, waving a pencil.

I wait for Fee to say, "Dominick Doyle, world-famous poet," what she started faithfully touting in those salad days when no one would buy even my doggerel. But the long flight from New York, a

Congratulations to Kathleen Dougherty on her nomination for the 1995 Edgar Allan Poe Award for best short story! The tale that brought Ms. Dougherty this most coveted of mystery honors, "When Your Breath Freezes," was published in *EQMM* in 1995 as one of the seven finalists in the previous year's MWA short story contest.

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plane change in Nairobi, the drizzle, and the deeply rutted mud roads have sapped what little strength she still possesses.

I sign the title page, and M'Guema bows his thanks, backing away. "I go check on your room, *monsieur.*"

From my rain-damped canvas knapsack I withdraw a fresh lemon, two packets of sugar, and an overambitious Swiss army knife. I slice the lemon, sprinkle sugar over each half, and nudge Fee. It takes her a moment to respond. She accepts the lemon and we both bite into the flesh at the same time. Tart juices tempered by sweet grains squirt onto my tongue, and our eyes meet. We've made a habit of the lemons, toting them on our vacations to the Galapagos, to China, to Ireland.

Yet this is not a vacation.

Over the rattle of the window air conditioner, the bartender says, "You are here for the clinic?" His French accent makes the last word "clinique."

I glance at Fee. Coming to the clinic was my idea, not hers. "We're not sure," I say. "M'Guema is taking us to visit some references." And I pray that what we see will change my wife's mind.

Under the brilliant sunlight, M'Guema's complexion glistens like the taut skin of an eggplant. He drives us in a Land Rover to meet the first reference, a native teenaged girl. He explains, "Very good leg, she. She walk go fast. She walk all ovair." I think he means this to be reassuring, that the girl is fully recovered thanks to the clinic's unique treatments. He has reason to sound optimistic. The natives prosper, supplying services to the desperate dying. Or, in my case, the desperate spouse. He tells us the girl's name, a word that sounds like Arugula.

The Land Rover lurches over the crazy-quilt road. Flies and mosquitoes boil above open sewer trenches. Meandering rivulets have eaten into the earth, and I wonder how long before we mire ourselves permanently.

After half an hour of slow progress, we are blocked by a group of boys leaping and shouting, waving madly, pointing with great excitement to the large puddle that obscures the rutted road. M'Guema hisses under his breath and brakes.

With a worried glance at Fee in the backseat, who appears to be sleeping, I say quietly, "What is it?"

"I take ze care, I take ze care," M'Guema assures me. He gets out and approaches the boys. An argument ensues, with M'Guema shaking his head and the boys hopping and pointing. I hear them

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cry "mzungu" often, the word for white person and, in this poor economy, the synonym for wealth. Finally they come to an agreement, and M'Guema gives them coins. The bounty is passed around, and two boys disappear under gigantic fig trees. They return dragging two long planks which are expertly arranged over the puddle to accommodate the Land Rover's tires.

More entrepreneurs benefiting from our presence via trickle-down economics. My payments to our chauffeur filter through to this opportunistic road crew.

M'Guema maneuvers the vehicle over the makeshift bridge—the boys, I note, quickly remove the planks, ready for the next customer—and we slog our way through the brick-red slurry to a village of mud houses.

He parks the vehicle next to the largest structure, attempting to shelter us in the hut's scant shade. The mucky clearing steams in the sun, vacant of life except for two bony cows. His fingers drum the steering wheel. His eyes dart all around. Our guide expects a welcoming party, I suppose.

"A moment, *s'il vous plait,*" he says. When he climbs out and slams the door, a gust of moist air, scented like water too long in the flower vase, sweeps inside. The air conditioning struggles to remove the odor. In my knapsack are the lemons, but Fee has only shifted slightly, her eyes shuttered above bluish crescents, head resting against the bench neckrest.

A few minutes pass before our guide comes into sight. One sandal is swallowed by the mud; he recovers it. He slips behind the steering wheel, eases the door shut with a cautious look at Fee.

Quickly, and in low tones meant only for my ears, M'Guema explains that a "loud misfortune" has befallen the girl Arugula. A very loud misfortune. He doesn't elaborate except to mutter that "she walk go fast in ze night." He appears in a hurry to leave, keying the ignition, shoving the stick shift into gear.

I straighten, unhappy with M'Guema's distress, and glance behind me at Fee, whose exhaustion has blurred her attention.

"The girl isn't here, is that what you're saying?" I ask quietly.

He waves his hand. "Pardon, pardon, no understand." M'Guema has suddenly lost his ability to comprehend English.

Wet vegetation slaps the sides of the Land Rover as he performs a three-point turn to aim the vehicle east. M'Guema's agitation has unnerved me. Has the native girl suffered unforeseen complications from the treatment?

M'Guema rocks the car over a trench, passing by an elderly man

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rounding the hut. The man's tall, lean frame is swathed in richly colored cloth. Decorative scars like lightning bolts cover his cheeks. The man uplifts a gourd and drinks. The scene is right out of *National Geographic*. Our Land Rover passes him and I twist around for a last look, wishing Fee were well enough to appreciate the sight, wishing we were here for a vacation instead of a risky medical procedure.

The man smiles. His few remaining teeth glisten red.

M'Guema says, "Sey dink se bud oov castle." After a moment's fog, my brain translates, "They drink the blood of cattle."

While Fee rests in our room, I slip away to the bar. Qoli, the bartender, has tilted his head, smooth and shiny as a billiard ball, toward M'Guema, whose back is to me. M'Guema flings his arms wide, rippling his sweat-stained shirt, his voice agitated in his native Kurundi. The monkey, on a perch outside its cage, shrieks with excitement, tiny hands fisted and striking its thighs.

I hear M'Guema say the native girl's name, Arugula, several times. Qoli catches sight of my approach, and M'Guema pivots, forcing a smile for my benefit. His hand clutches a cross on a silver chain around his neck.

"Monsieur, I bring you and *Madame* Doyle mango, *oui?"* He scampers to the side door and shoves it open, nearly smacking the woman outside stirring a large pot over a crackling wood fire. The scent of boiling oil wafts in. He gestures to the woman, who fishes in the cauldron and ladles onto a plate that she hands M'Guema. He flip-flops to me and points at the steaming cantaloupe-colored fruit. "Mango. You and *madame* like." He proffers the plate.

I shake my head; the oily scent brings a sharp wave of nausea. "What happened to the girl?"

He looks at me blankly, bereft of English again, but his pinched dark eyes speak of disquiet and agitation. For a moment, perversely, I see the old man by the hut, his blood-reddened smile.

To Qoli I say, "Arugula. Has she suffered some ill effects of the treatment?"

Qoli slices a sorry-about-this look at M'Guema. The bartender flattens his hands on the counter's rough wood. *"Non, monsieur.* A bad business, yes, but not to do with the clinic. The girl had the good health, but she . . ." He pauses, his eyes searching the ceiling for words. "She was delinquent. Killed the small cows. The babies, how do you say?"

"Calves."

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"Oui."

M'Guema wrings his hands, clutches my arm. No doubt he envisions me and my wife whisking away, taking our American dollars with us. "Please, *monsieur*. It is of no concern—"

I interrupt, "What happened to her? What loud misfortune?"

M'Guema hangs his head. "She fall in pit."

Qoli holds his hands as though his fingertips balance invisible balls. "Sticks with points. In the bottom. For to catch the bush pig, you know?"

I nod. "The girl didn't survive?"

Qoli shakes his head. *"Morte."*

A terrible way to die, but the girl hadn't experienced a lethal setback related to the viral therapy. Relief flutters over me. This unorthodox treatment is Fee's last chance, if I can only convince her.

The next afternoon we visit the other reference, an Australian family who rents a home that M'Guema claims is owned by the head of the militia.

An ungodly howling greets us before Fee and I reach the front door. A child shrieks, "No no no NO NO, bloody hell NO!"

Fee leans heavily on my arm, but she is more energetic than yesterday. Her eyebrows raise. I desperately want this visit to go well. The other references are scattered around the U.S., scattered around the world . . . and there is no time. I manage to say brightly, "Sounds quite chipper, wouldn't you say?"

A woman who reminds me of a middle-aged Katharine Hepburn appears at the door, twisting her fingers as though she could milk her anxiety from them. "Dear me." She darts a glance toward the hollering within, which is abating, though a few choice epithets are shouted in that childish voice. She bites her lip, flustered. "You must be the Doyles. Ah . . . forgive my manners. It's the mango flies, you see. . . ."

"I had no idea they were so verbal," Fee manages, trying to put her at ease.

The woman barks a clipped laugh, though she's still distracted. "Please come in." The door springs rasp with corrosion. A shirtless youngster barrels into the woman so hard that she staggers. The boy possesses that breathtaking beauty of certain blond children: rosy cheeks, cherub lips, the sweep of luxurious lashes. I pray that this vision of superior health is six-year-old Paddy, the clinic's reference.

My hand is grasped and pumped by a rotund, fortyish version of

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the boy. "Paddy Senior," he announces. "This brute is my son." In Paddy Senior's left hand is a vial of clear nail polish. The man grins under a blond bottlebrush moustache. "And this must be the missus." He shakes Fee's hand with the same gusto. With aggressive bonhomie, he sweeps us into the living room, settles us on the couch, and bids his nervous wife to fetch us iced tea.

The house stinks of burned wood and lemon-scented air freshener.

"Bloody remarkable," Paddy Senior says from his chair across from us. "We were at our wit's end, thinking we were going to lose our only child, when we heard about this clinic. Son, come to Papa."

The boy has one finger in his mouth, and he shakes his head. The child is a perfect beauty.

"No, now," Paddy Senior's voice wheedles, "I'm done with that, you see?" He slips the nail polish bottle into his shirt pocket. To us, the man explains, "You have to be careful with damp laundry. The blasted mango flies lay eggs wherever it's moist, and you put on a T-shirt, and you get these little bumps. The worm stage, you know?"

"Larvae?" says Fee.

I suppress a shudder. Fee has always been more tolerant of nature.

"That's them," says the man. "A Peace Corps volunteer told us about painting over the pimples with nail polish, and that suffocates the creatures. Then you sort of pop them out. But the boy won't let us near him with the polish." He grins affectionately at his son. "Will you, you little sot?"

Fee's eyes droop in commiseration. "The poor child." She adores children.

Paddy Junior's radar tunes in to Fee's empathy. He drops his finger from his lips, and his cherubic features brighten with a brilliant smile. He sidles to the couch and sits next to Fee.

"Watch out for him," his father warns, tongue in cheek, "he'll steal your heart."

The sound of breaking glass comes from the kitchen. Fee and I look up, but the Australian waves his hand. "It's all right. The wife has had the dropsy lately. There won't be a bloody thing left whole when we leave."

I rise. "If you'd tell Fee about Paddy's treatment, I'll help with the tea." I want to talk with the boy's mother alone.

"Suit yourself." The man shrugs. He leans toward my wife and begins to speak about what obviously is his favorite topic. "Paddy here was full of piss and vinegar until about a year ago . . ."

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In the kitchen, Mrs. Paddy squats, brushing glass fragments from the floor into a dustpan. The sooty odor is powerful in here, and my eyes automatically track to the ceiling above the stove. No signs of smoke damage. A kettle steams on a burner.

I hunker next to her. "Let me do that," I offer, and when I take the items, her fingers are icy.

She stands. "Everything slips from my grasp these days."

I sweep shards onto the plastic. "How much longer will you and your family be staying?"

She sighs, an exhalation that issues from deep in her chest. "Paddy is scheduled for the final examination tomorrow, so we should be back in Melbourne by Sunday."

I swivel, searching for scattered bits of crystal, and my gaze lights on the far wall. Scorch marks streak the white paint, as though a fire has been set on the linoleum near the baseboard. She notices the direction of my gaze, but turns away to discourage questions.

After I dump the broken glass into the dustbin, she allows me to slice lemons for the tea.

"Your wife Fee . . ." Mrs. Paddy hesitates, busying herself with releasing ice cubes from their trays. "How advanced is her condition?"

The knife is very dull, requiring vigorous sawing to cut through the fruit. To my dismay, my eyes water as though I'm slicing an onion. I can't get the words out, that Fee's life can be measured, at best, in one or two months, that if we wait even a week, her condition might be so deteriorated that the clinic won't allow her the treatment.

Cool fingers cover my hand. "I know," she whispers. "Anything seems better than watching the life of someone you love slip away."

She moves aside, clinking ice into glasses, pouring in hot tea so that the ice makes audible cracking sounds. I don't trust myself to speak, but I wonder why, now that her son's life is saved, she seems as miserable as I am.

We serve the tea, and I settle on the couch. The boy is nestled under Fee's arm.

Mrs. Paddy says, "We spoil him, don't you know? He's . . . he's a trial to discipline since the treatment—"

"Boys will be boys, hey?" interrupts her husband. "Paddy picks up on our gratitude, knows he can get away with murder, the little blighter."

His wife's attention settles on her son, and what I read in her

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expression isn't fondness, but an odd wariness. "He can be quite enchanting," she says, "when he puts his mind to it."

Fee is delighted. The boy is charming. The father, guileless, is proud of his son, his healthy, vibrant namesake. The woman's lips twitch at the corners.

The child leans his head against Fee's breast, his bright blue eyes flirtatious. "You . . . why, you're *beautiful,"* he exclaims.

My wife smiles, enchanted.

Convinced at last.

The clinic administrator cocks his head, puzzled. "Whatever do you mean, Mr. Doyle? Different how?" His English is flawless, with a slight British accent. His navy suit reminds me of the immigration police uniform. Add a dark blue beret, and he could be stamping visas.

He and I are alone in his office, which is in the visitors' wing. Complicated thick-metal doors and filtered air systems separate us from the treatment area, those corridors off-limits to all but staff and patients.

"I have, have heard," I stammer, "that changes to brain tissue often result in, ah . . ." I fidget. "Changes to brain tissue can result in negative personality traits. Irritability." Even to my own ears, I sound lame.

The administrator's lips straighten, his eyebrows draw together; he has the look of a man concerned. He tells me that another client, a man, healthy now and active in his business again, the man's wife called with an odd complaint. The man used to be a great cook, according to his wife. Now he can't stand the idea of being in the kitchen. And he's been working late at the office. When she calls the office, no one answers.

The administrator spreads his hands. "But you see, Mr. Doyle, when a person is victorious over a life-threatening illness, he often reevaluates his life. He becomes determined to not waste a moment. That can have alarming repercussions for the patient's family and friends, but it is more a reaction to escaping death than a result of our treatment here. We gave you several references, didn't we?"

I nod, my thoughts whirling. My repeated questioning of M'Guema about the girl's death made me suspect that her falling into the pit wasn't accidental, but I drew that conclusion from his stubborn reluctance to provide details. Paddy Junior's mother was troubled by her misbehaving offspring, but his father explained

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why the boy was such a handful; the child's cure altered his parents' discipline, tipped them toward leniency.

The administrator drones on about the Food and Drug Administration. "Your FDA is very slow to approve new treatments, but we feel confident that our success rate will be one they can't ignore."

My mind snags on an inner realization. What in God's name had I expected to accomplish here? Delay the only treatment that will save Fee's life? Now I'm alarmed. I sit up, abruptly at attention.

He is saying, ". . . so our follow-up ability isn't what it could be, but we think those three- and six-month post-intervention interviews are sufficient—"

"It's not that important," I blurt out. "I just wondered if you'd heard of any problems."

His mouth is still open from his unfinished sentence. I've foolishly set the klaxons to ringing in his head.

"Mr. Doyle, if you are aware of negative developments, I'd appreciate hearing details."

He doesn't know—yet—about the death of the native girl.

And I don't tell him.

Later I hunch at our room's ancient and battered secretary, staring at the yellow legal pad, waiting for the words. Writing has never been easy. Since Fee was diagnosed, writing has been even more difficult. My ability to shape a poem decreases as her symptoms increase. I clutch my head. Inside my skull whirl African mosquitoes, a man's teeth stained crimson, the amorphous ghost of the native girl, the propagating, rioting cells deep in Fee's brain, the dilemma about a treatment that might significantly change a disposition but save a life, unanswered questions about what constitutes a murder when the only death is an aspect of personality.

From behind me, Fee slips her hands over my shoulders. Even though distracted by yet another headache, she knows I'm in difficulty.

"Azure," she says. I touch her knuckles, trace down to the smooth surface of her fingernails. Her nails are perfect ovals. "Splinter," she says. "Roil." She plucks words from the hot, moist air and spins the syllables at me, and those spark others in my mind; at last, I begin to scrawl.

When it is dark and the room stifling—we keep the air condi-

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tioning off because Fee, now, is always chilled—I curve around her, my arms gentle. My lips are against her ear. "I love you."

She mumbles, half-asleep, "You must let go."

I can't.

God help me, I simply can't.

I sit in our room's Queen Anne chair, a ridiculous anomaly in this primitive hotel. The wind-up brass clock ticks, the sound maniacal like the too-rapid beat of my heart. My hands clench the armrests until my fingers are bloodless. Rain drums the corrugated tin roof.

Six minutes more. The point of no return is one P.M., the start of Fee's treatment, when a space-suited nurse will start the IV flowing. Before then, Fee can request release from the clinic. However, once the infusion delivers the virus to Fee's bloodstream, once she is pharmaceutically slipped into dreamtime for the duration of the infection, there is no return.

Fee has no reason to protest.

For her, there is a girl we did not see.

For her, there is a bright-eyed cherub charming her with his smile.

For her, there is a husband who loves her with an all-consuming passion, who can't bear to lose her.

From out of Africa come the viral hemorrhagic fevers, and from this same place and from this same illness comes a new genetic code, sufficient to reprogram the cells that would take over and destroy Fee.

This is the right thing, what I do. Her life will be saved; we'll have another thirty years together, a thousand more walks in Central Park, ten thousand more nights curled around one another in bed, a million more times for her to hear that I love her.

This is the right thing.

The minute hand moves imperceptibly, and then the clock pinches one P.M. between its arrows.

My grip releases. I reach for the knapsack and withdraw a lemon, which I slice on the scarred oak of the secretary. Every muscle trembles, as though I've run a long and unaccustomed race.

I lift the lemon to my lips and, forgoing the sugar, I bite into the fruit.

The taste is sour from the citrus, and salty from my tears. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Wider Scheme

by Ian Rankin

It is, of course, by no means unusual to find a solicitor in a police station.

We're called there at all hours of the day and night, sometimes by clients, sometimes by the police themselves. There is something about those stations, something unwholesome, and it leaves its mark on you. Put me in a room full of lawyers, and I'll tell you which ones spend a lot of time in police cells and interview rooms, and hanging around corridors and empty offices, fingers tapping impatiently against briefcases. Those lawyers have a tired, drawn look. They look like morticians. They lose colour and smile less than they used to. And they look nervous and cynical at the same time, their eyes flitting over you as if you'd been accused of something.

Today, I was sitting in Detective Inspector Jack Preston's office. He's a friend of mine, insofar as we've been known to share a drink, a meal, a joke. We have met socially at parties full of other

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CID men and lawyers. That's why he was doing me what he called a "favour." We were having a quiet word, the door closed, about a client of mine. Jack was keen to see my client put away, but knew I could mount a reasonable defence. He wanted to do some trading. He would drop a couple of charges if my client changed his plea.

This is the way the law works. It's the only thing that stops the courts blocking up completely. "Plumbing," Jack calls it. He says we're all plumbers' mates, trying to keep the *merde* flowing.

A well-reviewed author of two series of mystery novels, Ian Rankin has also received a lot of critical recognition lately in the short story field. In 1994 he won the British Crime Writers Association's Gold Dagger for his story "A Deep Hole," and recently the same story was nominated for the Bouchercon's Anthony Award.

I was putting the case for my client, not really trying too hard, just enjoying the exercise, when there was a knock at the door.

"Yes," Jack called. A head appeared round the door.

"Sorry, sir, I know you didn't want to be disturbed."

Jack waved the young man inside and introduced him as DC Derek Halliwell.

"What is it, Derek?"

"The eleven o'clock identification," DC Halliwell said. Jack checked his watch. It was two minutes to eleven.

"Christ," he said.

I smiled. "Time flies." It was true I'd been in his office awhile. We'd been chatting, that's all. Some gossip, a few stories, a cup of coffee.

"Do it without me," Jack said.

"It's not that, sir. We're one short for the lineup."

"Have you had a look around?"

"Nobody's available."

Jack thought about it. "Well, she knows me, I can't do it." Then he had an idea. He turned to me. I widened my eyes.

"You want *me* to appear in an ID parade?"

"You'd be doing us a big favour, Roddy."

"Would it take long?"

He smiled. "You know it wouldn't."

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I sighed, a little theatrically. "Only too pleased, Inspector, to help police with their enquiries."

Jack and DC Halliwell had a laugh as I got to my feet.

Most people I know, when they think of an ID parade, they imagine the American system: two-way mirror, the witness hidden from view. But it's not like that here. Here, the witness is face-to-face with the lineup. He or she walks along the line, then walks back along it. It can be distressing for all concerned. When Jack told me which case this present identification was concerned with, I felt pretty distressed myself.

We were standing in the anteroom.

"You might have warned me," I said.

"I'm telling you now," Jack said.

It was the Marshall case. Sophie Marshall had been mugged, and had died of her injuries before help could arrive. Her attacker had left her propped against a wall, and had taken only cash and jewellery. The hell of it was, I'd known Sophie Marshall. Well, I'd met her a few times, as had Jack. She'd been a court usher. We'd met her both professionally and at drinks parties. She'd been a good-looking young woman, full of life.

"Thing is," Jack confided, "you know and I know that the M.O. fits Barry Cooke."

I nodded. Barry Cooke was a young thug of the district who had mugged before and served time. He'd left the victim propped against a wall. I recalled his barrister saying in mitigation that Cooke had left the victim in that position to make him more comfortable. From the moment they found Sophie Marshall, the police suspected Cooke. They took him in for questioning, but he had a good alibi and a keen young solicitor. The proof against him was circumstantial. It wouldn't hold up in court.

"But now you've got a witness?" I said, interested.

Jack nodded. He seemed nervous. "A young woman, says she saw somebody near the scene about the time Sophie Marshall was attacked. We've brought Cooke in, see if she can point the finger." He shrugged. "That would just about do it."

"Good," I said. "Who is she?"

"The witness?" Jack shrugged again, lighting a cigarette for himself, despite the No Smoking signs on all four walls and above the door. "Just someone who lives near there. Actually, she lives on the floor above Marshall, but she didn't know her. She's not what you'd call the perfect witness."

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"How do you mean?"

"Wait till you see her: cropped hair, ring through her nose, tattoos. She's Ray Boyd's girlfriend. Know him?" I shook my head. "He's got a bit of a temper on him. He was in court a couple of days ago for assault. Got off with it though."

I nodded. "I think I recall the case."

The other members of the lineup were milling around, and now the anteroom door opened and Barry Cooke was led in. I didn't look at him. There was a quick briefing from Jack, and we were told to go into the ID room. There, we were arranged into a line. I was wearing a jacket borrowed from DC Halliwell, to make me look more "casual," and I'd taken off my tie. I still looked a good deal more formal than the others in the lineup, one of whom was a police officer.

I ended up as Number Four. Barry Cooke was right next to me. He was about a foot shorter than me, with thick unkempt hair tied back into a matted ponytail. His mouth was missing a few teeth, and his face was scarred with acne. I tried to look straight ahead of me, but of course he knew who I was.

"You're a lawyer, aren't you?" he said.

"No talking!" one of the policemen ordered.

Then the witness was brought into the room. Jack was with her, along with Cooke's solicitor, an upstart called Tony Barraclough. Barraclough recognised me, but didn't let it show. He'd probably been forewarned by Jack.

The witness was about Cooke's height and age. It struck me that they might know one another, but then this parade wouldn't have been necessary. She was an ugly little thing, except for her eyes. Her eyes were pretty, the way she'd once been pretty all over. But she'd scraped and savaged herself, pierced herself. She wore her underclass like a uniform.

She stopped in front of Number One, then passed Two and Three and stopped in front of me. I stared straight ahead, and she moved on to Barry Cooke. But she walked right past him to Number Six. I could see hope fade from Jack's face. His shoulders sagged. Eventually, she walked past us again. I thought this time she was going to stop at Cooke, but she was standing in front of me.

Then she reached up and tapped my shoulder.

"That's him," she said, "that's the bastard."

Jack shuffled his feet. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure all right. Definitely him. *Bastard!*" And she slapped me hard across the face.

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Two uniformed officers led her away, still screaming. Everyone looked a bit shaken up. I rubbed my cheek where it stung. Barry Cooke was watching me intently. Jack was having a quiet word with Tony Barraclough. Jack was smiling, Barraclough nodding. Then the lineup was dismissed, Cooke went off with Barraclough, and Jack came over to me.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"Do you think I should press a charge for assault?"

"What do you reckon?"

I shrugged. "You say her boyfriend's often in trouble?"

"Not often."

"Maybe she's seen me in the courts."

"Yes, that's possible. Decided to have a go at you. That makes sense. Otherwise . . . well, I mean, you and Cooke, you're chalk and cheese."

"Further apart than that, I think."

"Well, anyway, sorry." He pointed to my cheek. "I can see the outline of her fingers."

I rubbed the cheek again. "I hope it fades before I go home."

"I didn't know your wife was the jealous type." Jack put a hand on my shoulder. "Roddy, these identity parades work less often than you'd think. I've been picked out myself once or twice."

"No problem," I said, trying to smile.

But I was worried, all the same.

The shock wore off, and I found I had an idea.

I wanted to see if it was possible that Ray Boyd himself could have been Sophie Marshall's attacker. I knew from Jack that Boyd had a temper, that he'd been in court for assault. It didn't take me too long to find what I was looking for in the court records. But his previous arrests were for assaults on men, not women. They usually took place in the form of one-sided fights outside pubs. Boyd was a good fighter, by all accounts, in that he tended to lose his head and become a whirlwind, all arms and attitude, feet and ferocity. He didn't care if you hit him back. He shrugged blows off and kept on pummeling. On the last occasion, it had taken several bystanders to drag him off his cowed opponent.

There was no mention of a girlfriend, and I didn't want to ask Jack about her. I didn't want him involved, not at this stage. But I had Boyd's address, so I drove myself out there, thanking God I hadn't yet got rid of my Ford Sierra and traded up to the Mercedes or BMW which I'd been promising myself. Where Ray

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Boyd lived, even a newish Sierra turned heads.

It was a mazy block of flats, eight storeys high and the colour of old dishwater. I parked my car in a bay and sat for a while, wondering what to do next. Fortunately, my wife is a birdwatcher. Her own car having been out of action last weekend, she'd borrowed mine so she and her fellow "twitchers" could drive to some godforsaken spot to stare at a rare Siberian visitor. Her binoculars were still in the car. They were her second-best pair, compact in size and sheathed in green rubber. I scanned the tiers of the tower block. On the other side of the block, there were only anonymous windows, but I was parked in a kind of inner arena. This side, there were long walkways and front doors, liftshafts and stairwells. Boyd's flat was 316, which I soon realised meant floor 3, flat 16.

Scanning what third floor doors I could see, I eventually picked out flat 16. It looked no better or worse than its neighbours. I put the binoculars away and sat there, keeping an eye on it, pretending to read a newspaper. Even the paper, I realised, was wrong for this part of town. Not many broadsheets around here.

"You make a lousy detective," I told myself.

A few children playing with a ball came to look at me. I don't know who they thought I was, but they were properly mistrustful of authority, and soon went away again. I could have been a policeman, a debt collector, or anyone. It struck me how ridiculous this was, me sitting here. But I wanted to get a look at Ray Boyd; to size him up, as it were.

When his flat door opened, Boyd came out accompanied by the witness. I wished I knew her name, but at least I knew where she stayed. Jack had told me. Boyd and his girlfriend were walking. I tried following them in the car but they were walking too slow for this to be feasible, so I parked by the side of the road and followed on foot. After a quarter of a mile, I reckoned I knew where they were headed: the girlfriend's flat on the Horseshoe Estate, where Sophie Marshall had lived. I'd seen enough; I headed back to my car. A policeman had already ticketed it.

Barry Cooke himself was next.

Again, I used the court records. I even had a quiet word with his solicitor. Meeting casually, we spoke of the identity parade, and laughed about it. Then I asked him about Barry Cooke. Barraclough didn't seem surprised or suspicious that I was asking. We were just two lawyers, enjoying a bit of a chat.

The more I looked at Barry Cooke, the more feasible it all

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seemed. A mugging gone wrong. Violence taken too far. And the M.O. fitted his own: I knew that already. All he had on his side were his alibi, his protestation of innocence, and the fact that the witness had singularly failed to identify him. He was still the chief suspect. However, the police had no reason to disbelieve the witness, to suspect that she was playing some game. Not unless it could be shown that she was. I had a picture in my head: an apparent witness who has come forward not to assist the enquiry but to ensure it takes a wrong turn. That she picked me out was an accident; it could have been anybody . . . anybody but the actual culprit. I liked this picture and wondered if Jack could see it too.

As I was leaving the court, I saw a figure dart round a corner. I went to my car and sat in it for a moment, pretending to look for something in my briefcase, but really keeping an eye on my wing mirror. The figure reappeared, seeking me out.

It was Barry Cooke.

I drove out of the car park and a couple of hundred yards down the road to a burger restaurant, where I pulled in. I waited, but there was no sign of a following car. Now that I thought about it, I'd read in one of the court reports that Barry Cooke could not drive. It was on his side in the Marshall case, for as Barraclough had said, Cooke's alibi was that he was at a party four miles away from where Sophie Marshall's body had been found. No way could he have walked that distance and back. Someone would have to have driven him there, which, as Barraclough said with a smile, was most unlikely.

Still, Barry Cooke had been to court several times. So had Ray Boyd. And so, in all probability, had Boyd's girlfriend. Any one of them might have seen Sophie Marshall before. Maybe she'd been picked out. . . .

None of which got me any further. Proof was the thing. The police needed proof. I waited, but there was no sign of Barry Cooke, so I started the car again and drove home to my wife.

Next morning, as I parked the car outside my offices, I saw him again. He was good at being furtive, but solicitors deal with furtive people all the time, and I spotted him straightaway. I locked the car and started towards him. At first, I thought he was going to run for it, but he decided instead to stand his ground. He put his hands in his pockets and waited for me.

"Are you following me?" I asked.

Barry Cooke shook his head. "Got a right to be here, haven't I?"

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"I saw you yesterday, skulking."

He shrugged. "So?"

"So why are you following me?"

He considered a response. Bad liars usually take their time. "That witness picked you out," he eventually said.

"Yes?"

"But the coppers are still hassling *me.*"

"You want me to do something about it?"

He frowned. "No, I just . . . that witness picked you out."

"Don't be ridiculous. She made a mistake, that's all." I paused. "Maybe she was paid to make a mistake."

He narrowed his eyes. "How do you mean?"

But I just shrugged. "Now," I said, "are you going to stop following me, or must I call DI Preston?"

He screwed up his face. "Preston, that bastard. You're all in it together, you lot. All matey, all favours and stuff."

"I don't know what you mean."

He just made another face and walked away. I watched him go. Then, trembling a little, I went into my office and opened a fresh bottle of brandy.

I knew I had to talk to the witness. The problem was: Would she talk to me?

It was difficult. I was finding it harder to get things straight in my mind. I knew I was in dangerous territory, and that things might get worse still. I spent all the rest of that day watching for Barry Cooke, but I never saw him. Maybe my warning was enough; maybe he was keeping his distance for reasons of his own. But someone did scratch my car. I phoned my wife and told her about it, explaining that after work I was going to get respray estimates from a couple of garages.

Then I headed out to Sophie Marshall's estate.

I parked at a distance and had to walk down the very alley where she'd been attacked. It was a dreary spot, a narrow corridor bordered by high brick walls covered in graffiti. There was a railway line nearby, trains thundering past. A terrible place to die. I had to stop for a moment and control my breathing. But I went on.

It is difficult, more difficult than I'd imagined, to hang about on these estates while remaining inconspicuous. People came to their windows, and children stopped playing to stare at me. So I climbed the stairwell and walked about a bit outside the lines of flats, looking like I knew where I was going.

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It was hopeless. After a nervous half-hour, I decided to return to my car. I was sitting in the driver's seat, hands clutching the steering wheel, trying to calm myself down, when I saw her. She walked on loud high-heeled boots, spiky things, as spiky as she herself was. She wore tight black denims, ripped at the knees, and a baggy black T-shirt. She was coming from the direction of the Horseshoe Estate, but she hadn't brought Boyd with her, thank God. I didn't want to have to deal with Boyd, not if I could help it. She had her head down, either sullenly or just to avoid eye contact with other pedestrians. Standard practice these days, sad to say.

She passed within feet of my car, but didn't so much as glance at it. I gave her half a minute to walk down the alley, then got out of the car, locked it, and followed. I was giving her plenty of time. By the time I got to the far end of the alley, she had already crossed the quadrangle and was somewhere in the block. Then I saw her appear on the third floor. She walked to the fourth door from the stairs, and opened it with a key.

I followed.

I stood outside her door for the best part of a minute, then bent down to look through her letterbox. I could hear music, probably a radio. But no voices, no other sounds. I stood up again and looked at the nameplate on the door. It was a piece of cheap lined paper, stuck to the paintwork with tape. AFFLICK, it said. I knocked a four-beat rhythm, a friendly knock, then waited.

There was no spy hole, so when she came to the door she opened it. No security chain either. I pushed the door open wide and went in.

"Hoi," she said, her voice a squeal, "what the hell—?"

Her voice died as she recognised me. Her cheeks went red.

"I just want to talk, that's all. Five minutes of your time."

"I'll yell bloody murder," she said.

I smiled. "I don't doubt it. Look, I wouldn't have come here, but I need to speak to you."

"What about?"

"I think you know. Can we sit down?"

She took me into the living room, which was little more than a hovel. She went straight to the fireplace, switched off the radio, opened a packet of cigarettes, and lit one for herself. She never took her eyes off me. She looked scared. I cleared a space and sat down on the sofa. I crossed my legs, trying to look relaxed, hoping she wouldn't see me as a threat. I didn't want that.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Do you know a young man called Barry Cooke?"

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"Never heard of him," she said defiantly.

"No? He was on that lineup with me. He was standing right next to me. Short hair tied back, scruffy."

"You've got a nerve coming here."

She had pulled herself together. I'll give her that; she was strong-willed.

"Barry Cooke," I continued, "is the man the police think killed Sophie Marshall. They were hoping you'd identify him."

"I identified *you*. It was you I saw."

I smiled and looked at the floor between us. "The police are trying to pin down Barry Cooke."

"So what?"

"So . . . you could help them."

"What?"

"You could remember something about the man you saw that night. You could . . . change your mind." I reached into my jacket pocket and brought out an envelope.

"What's that?" she said, curious now.

"Money, a lot of it. A one-off payment for your cooperation."

"You want Cooke convicted?"

"I want *some*one convicted, and it may as well be him."

Well, hadn't I left Sophie's body that way on purpose, remembering Cooke's M.O.? Hadn't I taken her money and jewellery? But I hadn't counted on Cooke having such a strong alibi. I hadn't counted on there being a witness.

"Look," I said, "take the money."

"But it was *you* I saw that night."

"That doesn't matter," I said, feeling this to be the truth. What did it matter, a brief affair gone badly wrong? A threat to tell wife and colleagues? A chase through an alley? What did any of it matter in the wider scheme?

"You killed her."

"I didn't mean to."

"But you did, and now you want to fit up Cooke."

"What I want," I said quietly, "is to give you some money. What have you got to lose? The police didn't believe you when you pointed me out at the lineup. They'll never believe you. You might as well take the money and tell them some other story."

She came towards me, her eyes on the envelope. I handed it up to her. She took it and placed it on the mantelpiece. "Barry Cooke," she said quietly.

"Short," I said, "grubby, with a ponytail and spots and a few miss-

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ing teeth. He's mugged women before. You'd be doing society a favour."

She stared at me. "Right," she said sourly. "A favour."

I stood up and buttoned my jacket. "I think we understand one another," I said. Then I walked out into her hall. I was opening the front door when she called to me. I turned. She was standing in the living room doorway. She had the cigarette in her mouth, her eyes slitted against the smoke, and she was hauling at the hem of her T-shirt with both hands, tugging it up. I didn't realise what she was doing. Then I saw. There were strips of tape on her stomach, and a thin snaking black wire attached to a black transmitter. She was bugged.

I yanked open the front door and Jack Preston was standing there in front of me.

"Hello, Roddy," he said.

We sat in Interview Room A, having a chat.

Jack explained it all quite quickly. How Gayle Afflick *had* seen me in the courts, the day boyfriend Ray was up for assault, and how she had recognised me as the man she'd seen that night. Her boyfriend told her I was a solicitor, and this worried her. Who would take her word against that of a solicitor? She knew one decent copper, someone who *might* believe her: DI Jack Preston.

That time in Jack's office, it had been a setup, neatly played by Jack and Halliwell to get me into a lineup, where Gayle Afflick could identify me. Jack wanted to see how I'd react, what I'd do. He had a good idea I'd want to talk to the witness afterwards.

It all fitted, as far as he was concerned. There were rumours around the court that Sophie Marshall had been seeing a married man. It figured that this man most probably knew her from her professional life. (She didn't have much of a social one.) When Jack found that my car had been ticketed on a road between the Horseshoe Estate and Gayle Afflick's block, a long way off my usual patch, he knew he was onto something.

So he'd had Gayle Afflick tailed, and had her wired up too, taking the whole thing carefully, nice and slow, because he knew how easy it would be to lose me. But he hadn't lost me. He had it all now, the whole story. And he had me. He asked if I wanted a solicitor.

"Of course I want a solicitor."

"I hear Tony Barraclough's good," Jack said.

That smell was in my nostrils, that police station smell. There were, I decided suddenly, worse smells, far worse smells, in the wider scheme of things. ●

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WINGLESS PEGASUS

by Gillian Linscott

Although she is primarily an historical mystery writer, Gillian Linscott chose twentieth century settings for her three previous stories for us. The following tale is set in Victorian England and features as sleuths a Fleet Street journalist and a disreputable groom.

There was a terrace behind the house with swags of cream and apricot roses, steps leading down to a broad lawn with a cedar tree. The lawn sloped away to a deep ditch, separating the garden from a meadow where cattle grazed. At the boundary of lawn and meadowland was a small lake a couple of acres in extent. The island was not quite in the centre of the lake, nearer the shore on the meadow side, about the size of a large drawing room, with a marble statue of Venus, half-draped, rising from a tangle of rushes and meadowsweet. Nothing else to see at all except, early on that June morning, a horse. A white horse, standing up to the hocks in meadowsweet and early morning mist from the lake, looking itself like a statue, except when you got closer you'd have seen that it was shivering and its nostrils flaring, not being the sort of horse used to spending its nights in the open, even in an English summer. No ordinary horse either. If half-draped Venus had grown tired of English country life and summoned the gods' horse Pegasus to carry her back up to Olympus, this was what might have arrived in answer. Only Venus couldn't fly away after all because the instant his Olympian hooves touched the damp soil of Berkshire, Pegasus had lost his wings and became, like her, marooned in 1866 on a small island on the moderate-sized estate of a man who had made his fortune from railways.

That, at any rate, is how it might have looked to a fanciful observer with a rudimentary knowledge of classical mythology who happened to be looking out from the terrace early that morn-

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ing. In fact it was a housemaid glancing from her window in the attic who first saw it and she—knowing nothing of Pegasus or Venus—went downstairs and informed the undercook that one of the carriage horses must have got let out of its stable and there'd be the devil to pay when the head groom found out about it. From there the news went out to the stables where a hasty check of heads found that all six equine members of Sir Percy Whitton's establishment were present and correct in their boxes. A delegation of stable staff, along with some of the gardeners picked up on the way, hurried across the lawn to the edge of the lake, and realised at once that this was no ordinary horse. Where it came from and how it had arrived overnight, saddled and bridled, on Sir Percy's little island, was a cause of universal puzzlement overtaken by the necessity of getting it to more solid land. This presented problems because the small rowing boat that was usually kept on the lawn side of the lake for the amusement of Sir Percy's guests had been reduced to splinters in an accident with a garden roller the week before and its replacement had not yet arrived. After some discussion several grooms and gardeners took off their boots, waistcoats, and jackets and waded into the lake. At its deepest it came up to chest height but they went on firmly, encouraged by shouts from their friends on the bank and, possibly, the prospect of some substantial sign of gratitude from whoever turned out to be the owner of the animal which was watching them apprehensively, showing every sign of wanting to bolt but, of course, with nowhere but the lake to go. I would guess that at this point, in spite of the difficulties, the rescuers were lighthearted. It was a diversion from the work of the morning and there was no reason to think that they were engaged in anything more sinister than the recovery of a fine animal. A groom was the first to step ashore. I suspect that the ardour of the gardeners decreased as they came closer to the dancing, snorting object of their quest. He put hand on the rein, made calming noises. Then he gave a shout and the horse reared up, almost dragging the rein from his hand.

"There's a man here, a man hurt. I think it's Sir Percy."

But long before the swaddled form was carried on a hurdle up the lawn and under the cedar with silent gardeners and grooms around it, the whole household knew that the groom had been only half right. The man on the island was indeed their employer, Sir Percy, but he wasn't hurt—he was dead.

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The bare outline of Sir Percy's death reached me on a June evening in London. I read it on a damp galley proof in my place of work, a subeditors' room in inky Fleet Street.

> We have received reports from Berkshire that the director of the South Western Shires Railway Company, Sir Percy Whitton, has been killed in a riding accident on his estate near Maybridge. An inquest is to take place tomorrow. Funeral arrangements will be notified.

I hardly knew the man personally, having been in the same room as him on a couple of public occasions, and my first thought was what a sad loss this would be for the lawyers. Sir Percy and his neighbour Charles Clawson of the Wiltshire and Berkshire Railway were at daggers drawn. The Wiltshire and Berkshire had got an Act of Parliament to drive their new branch line along the hill opposite Sir Percy's house. He said it was an abomination, and if a gentleman couldn't live in his own home without steam engines scaring his cattle and blowing smuts all over his guests, it was all up with the rights and liberties of old England. This in spite of the fact that his own money came from railways. The resulting court case, due to open in a week's time, had been anticipated as one of the great events of the legal season. Sir Percy was expected to win, if only because his purse was longer than Clawson's and he'd take it all the way to the House of Lords if necessary. There was extra spice in the fact that the combatants were related by marriage. Clawson had given the hand of his only daughter, Emily, to Sir Percy at a time several years earlier when the two men were business partners, before they fell out.

It's an unfortunate fact of working for a newspaper that all the most interesting things you get to know are those that law or society won't allow you to print. I collect such stories as other men collect ferns or butterflies. I sniffed one here and, by grace of those same railways that began the battle, I was in the little market town of Maybridge before lunchtime next morning. I already had a direct line into the gossip of the area through my old and disreputable friend, Harry Leather. Harry is a groom, jockey, livery keeper, dealer, in fact, in anything you please as long as it has a lot to do with horses and as little as possible to do with the law. He's as small and agile as a street urchin but I suppose is a man in middle years, although from the wrinkles on his weatherbeaten face he looks old enough to have traded horses with the Pharaohs —probably to their disadvantage. At that time he was managing a

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livery stables at Maybridge, so when I got there I made straight for his establishment on one side of the market square, knowing that nothing that moved on four legs and precious little on two escaped his network. I found him in the saddle room, cleaning tack, and after an exchange of civilities asked him the time of the inquest.

"You've missed it, Mr. Ludlow. They opened it at nine o'clock and it was all over by eleven."

"What was the verdict?"

"Misadventure."

"Much interest in it locally?"

He hooked up a stirrup leather and ran a cloth slowly down it. The meaty smell of neat's-foot oil hung in the warm air, along with whiffs of horse from the loose boxes.

"What do you think?"

"Was he well-liked?"

"Well enough by those as liked him."

With Harry, this kind of game could go on all day. But I knew he was hugging information of some kind as closely as a child hugs a puppy. I watched while he oiled a few more leathers then asked him what he knew about the riding accident. It was then that I got most of the details about the island, the shivering white horse, and the man lying dead, with Harry going on with his work all the while, watching me sidelong to see what I was making of it.

"Do you want to see him?"

The sudden question jolted me. I thought at first that he was talking about Sir Percy's corpse, surely now in the hands of the undertaker.

"See who?"

"The horse."

He got up unhurriedly and led the way across the yard. We went past the lines of worthy hacks and dependable carriage horses, round the corner to the few isolated boxes that he keeps for invalids or mares close to foaling. As we turned the corner a high whinnying came from one of the boxes. A head as white as new milk came over the half door, large wild eyes, wide pink nostrils.

"An Arabian. A fine one, too."

We stood looking over the half door while the horse rolled his eyes and snorted at us. He wasn't large, under sixteen hands, but

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every line of him, from his long back to his clean cannon bones, sang out speed and breeding.

Harry ran a calming hand down the arched neck.

"We have to keep him here because he's entire. Cover every mare in the yard if he had his way."

A stallion, not gelded, therefore as wild as the wind and as unpredictable.

"No wonder Sir Percy got thrown. I suppose he was out for a hack, got bolted with into the lake and onto the island, then the horse reared up and threw him."

Harry snorted, making a noise much like the horse.

"And I'm the Queen of Fairyland."

I suppressed the picture of Harry in rosy wreaths and diaphanous draperies.

"You don't think it happened that way?"

"No, I don't, and if you think about it, neither do you."

"Oh, and why don't I?"

"For one thing, you know horses a touch better than that. Have you ever met an Arab in your life that was any use over water? Can't stand it, coming from deserts like they do."

"If he was bolting . . ."

"If he was bolting, he'd bolt away from water, not across it."

"But he was on the island. I gather nobody disputes that?"

"Nobody's likely to, given the trouble they had to get him off it."

"So how did he get there?" Harry turned towards me with the glint in his eye that usually means the other man is about to get the worse of a bargain.

"That, Mr. Ludlow, is the second most peculiar thing about this whole business."

"Oh? So, what's the first, Harry?" He paused, enjoying his moment.

"The most peculiar of the lot is what Sir Percy was doing with him in the first place."

"Hacking out on him, surely."

He gestured towards the horse, calmer now and watching us with interest, although still as ready to fly as a bird from a cage.

"You look at that animal and tell me if he'd let a fat counting-house man like Sir Percy Whitton throw a leg over him. A racing lord might ride him, a tinker boy as wild as he is might ride him, but he wouldn't let any ordinary hacking man as much as put a toe in his stirrup iron."

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I looked at the horse and had to admit that I knew what he meant. Harry, seeing my face, nodded.

"Sir Percy couldn't have ridden a hair of his tail."

"But they were on the island together, and Sir Percy was dead."

"That's it."

"So there must have been somebody else there?"

"Not when they got there. The chief groom's a friend of mine. I had it all from him direct."

"He can't have dropped from the clouds. Was there any sign anybody else had been there?"

"By the time they'd got Sir Percy off the island, then the horse, the whole lot was as trampled as if they'd fought a battle over it."

I thought of Charles Clawson and my mind went racing.

"Supposing, for the sake of argument, that somebody had wanted to harm Sir Percy. If he managed to get him alone on a little island with a horse that might be dangerous . . ."

"Be a damned sight easier to wait for him behind a bush with a brace of pistols, begging your pardon. Anyhow, you've still got to get the horse to the island."

And Charles Clawson, as I remembered, was a hacking sort of counting-house man too—no rider for the white horse.

"It would be a complicated way to murder anybody."

At the word murder, Harry turned away. He said, under his breath: "Suppose a man's got to have an interest in life, but yours seems a damned odd one to me."

We'd had this out before, but he'd keep worrying at it.

"Why so? Doesn't it interest you, thinking that a person may be killed by another person and nobody ever know how it happened, or why? You could write whole books about it."

"Funny sort of books they'd be. Who'd want to read them?"

"Just about everybody who's curious about his fellow men and women."

He shook his head. "What that doesn't take into account is that there are what you might call public murders and there are private murders, and it doesn't do to confuse the two of them."

"What do you mean?"

We began walking slowly back across the yard. A dog dozed in the sun and a boy swept the already immaculate brick paving.

"What I call a public murder, let's say a poacher shoots a keeper, everybody knows who's done it, he's tried at the assizes, people go to see him hanged, and that's an end of it. A private

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murder—somebody kills somebody for a good or a bad reason and doesn't want the whys and wherefores of it known, and mostly you wouldn't do any good to anybody making them known, only stir up more trouble. What you're doing is intruding on private murder."

"You think it was murder then?"

He didn't answer. I asked him how the Arab had come to be in his yard.

"Had to go somewhere until they find out who owns him, and he couldn't have stopped at Sir Percy's place, could he?"

"Why not?"

"The young widow. As soon as she hears about the white horse she faints clean away—thinking, I suppose, of her poor husband being trampled and so on. The doctor says he won't be answerable if she sets eyes on the animal, so they call me in and I ride him over here."

"Ah yes, the widow. Charles Clawson's daughter. She must have been a lot younger than her husband."

"About a quarter of a century younger. Down here they reckon her father gave her to Sir Percy in return for a parcel of railway shares." Harry said it as matter-of-factly as you'd talk of trading one horse for another.

"She'll be a rich widow now, Mr. Ludlow, and a nice-looking young lady at that. Good chance for somebody." He laughed and looked at me sidelong.

"I'm not bidding. Was she at the inquest?"

"Yes. Had to answer questions from the coroner about when she'd last seen her husband."

"When had she?"

"Dinner the night before. She went up to bed early, having a headache from the heat. First she knew about it was when her maid woke her up in the morning."

"Had he said anything to her about going out?"

"Not a word, but then he wouldn't, would he?"

There was something odd about the way Harry said that, but I left that for later.

"It must have been a sad ordeal for her."

"Very composed she was, while she was telling it. Afterwards, while she was walking out, she nearly collapsed on her brother's arm. He'd come back from Oxford especially when he heard about it."

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"Did they say at the inquest whether Sir Percy was trampled? Were there marks of horseshoes on him?"

"Not one, just the back of his head caved in. The head groom said it looked as though he'd fallen and hit it on the base of the statue, the Venus."

He stopped in front of another loose box in the middle of the long row. There was a dark bay mare inside, cobby sort, sixteen hands, facing away from us and munching hay. She looked quiet and steady, as unlike the Arab as anything on four legs.

"She's Sir Percy's."

"What's she doing here in a livery yard? Did his wife send her away too?"

He shook his head.

"I got up early in the morning and there she was tied to the hitching ring outside the gates. She was covered in mud and tired fit to drop, but whoever left her there had knotted up the reins and run up the stirrups properly."

"When was this?"

"The morning they found Sir Percy's body."

"How far away from here is Sir Percy's place?"

"Four miles."

I could hardly take in what he was telling me, and I must have spluttered my questions. How did he know the mare was Sir Percy's? Could the man have ridden her four miles in the night and walked back in time to be dead on his own island by sunrise, and if so, why? Had Harry told the coroner's officer? The answer to that last question was no, as I should have guessed knowing his dislike for the law. As for how he'd known, it turned out that the mare was a frequent guest at his livery stables when Sir Percy rode into town.

"But you told me that the head groom checked the stables that morning and all Sir Percy's horses were there."

"So they were, all as were meant to be there. This mare was never in his stables. He kept her in his estate manager's stable half a mile from the house and his wife never knew she existed."

There could only be one reason for that.

"You're telling me that Sir Percy kept a *petite amie* in the town here and used the mare to visit her?"

No need, with Harry, to pretend to be shocked. He lives by the morals of the reign before Her Majesty's, if he can be credited with any at all.

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"Tuesday and Thursday nights," was all he said. Sir Percy's body had been found early on Wednesday morning.

"Didn't any of this come out at the inquest?"

"Wouldn't have been decent, would it, with his body lying cold and his poor wife sitting there hearing it. I reckon half the jury knew about it and probably the coroner as well for that matter, but nobody was going to say so."

"But it was relevant, wasn't it? Sir Percy has dinner with his wife. Some time after that he walks to his estate manager's house, collects the mare, and starts riding into town. Either on the way there or on the way back he is diverted, for no good reason, onto an island in his lake along with an Arab stallion from God knows where that doesn't like crossing water. His mare, meanwhile, somehow finds her way back to your livery stables and ties herself neatly to a hitching ring. Isn't that a sequence a coroner should know about?"

"Put that way, I'm not saying you're wrong, Mr. Ludlow, but I still don't see what good it would do."

"This woman he visited—do you know her?"

"Name of Lucy Dester. House with the green door, opposite the baker's."

I stood making up my mind, staring at the back view of the cobby mare. Aware of eyes on her, she twitched her tail, shifted her hind legs.

"Looks a touch short-tempered."

"Not her. Quiet as a cushion, only she's in season at the moment. Anyway, if you're set on finding out what happened, you've seen both of them that matter now."

He meant both horses in the case—horses being more important to Harry than people. He said just one thing more before we parted at the gate.

"Now don't you go making her miserable. She's a decent enough party in her own way."

There was a man in bloodstained clothes hammering at Lucy Dester's green front door. He looked as if he'd been there for some time, and a small crowd had gathered. I asked a loitering boy who the bloodstained man was and gathered he was the local butcher. I loitered with the rest of the crowd and when, after a few more minutes of beating, the door opened a crack I was able to get a glimpse of the person inside. At risk of being ungallant, she struck

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me as being ten years too old and a couple of stone too heavy to qualify as any sort of nymph. Her voice, when she told the butcher to go about his business, was not refined. He thrust a solidly booted foot into the door crack and pulled a paper from his pocket.

"Two pounds, three shillings, and fourpence halfpenny."

That was the burden of his song, several times repeated. Mrs. Dester owed him two pounds, three shillings, and fourpence halfpenny, and he wouldn't budge from her doorstep until he got it. I fumbled in my pocket, approached the door.

"This is most uncivil behaviour to a lady. Now take your money and be off with you."

He stared open-mouthed at me, then at the coins in his hand, and withdrew muttering. The crack in the doorway opened a little wider and I stepped inside. There were broken expressions of gratitude, explanations about money orders not arriving. I found myself sitting opposite her in a neat parlour, sipping a glass of Madeira.

"I kept it for him," she said. "He always enjoyed his Madeira."

There was no need to ask to whom she was referring. She'd taken me for a friend of his who knew about the relations between them and had come to offer sympathy. She was not an unpleasing woman in either person or conversation, with quantities of lustrous black hair, pink rounded cheeks, and a warmth of manner that compensated for her lack of refinement. She had been, by her account, employed as an actress in London until Sir Percy set her up in a small establishment in town. When he decided to spend more time on his estate, he moved her to the present lodgings.

"And last Tuesday night . . . ?"

She sighed deeply. "There was a nice cold collation laid out for him, ham and fowl, and his claret decanted all ready. He never came."

"Did you think something had happened to him?"

"Not that, oh no. Unexpected guests, I thought, or business that had kept him at home. Nothing like what happened."

"When did you know?"

"It was all round the town. I went out to buy some ribbons for my bonnet and that b—I mean a customer at the haberdashers said she supposed I'd heard about the accident." Two plump tears trembled on her cheeks, ran down.

"I haven't put a foot outside since, and it's been nothing but people at the door with bills, bills, bills. When he was alive, you see,

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they all knew he'd meet them, but now he's gone they don't have any pity and there's not so much money in the house as a third-class fare back to London."

She bent her head and wept in earnest. I tried to comfort her, although there was very little I could do or say. She looked up at last, eyes brimming with tears.

"I was fond of him, you know. I really was fond of him."

Before I left I asked if she knew anybody who owned a white Arab stallion. No more than the man in the moon, she said.

I borrowed a hack from Harry and spent the rest of the afternoon riding out to Sir Percy's estate to look at the island, to no effect whatsoever. When I got back to the livery stables we had supper, chops and eggs cooked on the old stove in Harry's den next to the saddle room. It seemed that my rescue of Lucy Dester from the butcher was the talk of the town and he made a few heavy-hooved jokes on the theme.

"You're right, though, she seems a decent enough woman in her way, and she has nothing to gain from his death—quite the reverse."

We'd already agreed that I should stay the night in the hayloft, and we were sorting out horse rugs when there was a knocking at the yard gate. Harry's head came up.

"Who the devil is it at this hour?"

It was past ten o'clock, deep dusk, with no sound but the horses munching hay in their boxes. The big double gates to the yard were bolted, but there was a smaller door cut into them. Harry unlatched it and we both looked out. At first there was nothing to see, then a figure stepped out of the shadows and in at the door as quickly as a bat flying. It came in a swish of silk, black garments fluttering.

"I want to buy a horse."

It was a woman's voice, a young woman's. There was a desperate determination in the way she spoke and moved. She had a black bonnet covering her hair, framing a small face as pale as a frost-struck white rose. Her sudden arrival and the unlikeliness of her words left me speechless, although she'd addressed them to me. But Harry, by nature and calling, couldn't help responding to an opening like that, whether it came from man, woman, or hobgoblin.

"What kind of a horse, ma'am?"

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"The white Arab."

I was on the point of explaining that he wasn't ours to sell when Harry nudged my arm and drew me to one side. He whispered in my ear, "The widow." Then, back to her: "He's not a lady's horse, ma'am."

"I don't care about that. What's your price?"

If you listened very hard you could hear the tremor in her voice, like a high note on a violin, but to look at her she was snow and steel.

"Fifty guineas, ma'am."

A black-gloved hand came out of her draperies, holding a small pouch.

"Count them out."

Harry counted them on the edge of the mounting block, the coins gleaming in the last of the light, and gave the diminished pouch back to her.

"Where shall I send him, ma'am?"

"Don't send him anywhere. Shoot him."

I'd never have thought to see Harry thunderstruck, but if the heavens had landed on him he couldn't have been more amazed.

"Sh . . . shoot him?"

"Shoot him tonight and bury him."

"But . . ."

Her black glove came up, signing him to be quiet.

"He's my horse now. I've bought him and paid for him, and I can have done as I like with him."

Then, as suddenly as she'd come, she stepped out through the little door and was gone. In the stunned silence I could hear her feet tapping away round the corner. Harry looked sick.

"Well here's a fine thing," I said. "You've accepted money for another man's horse and now you're obliged to shoot him."

"I'd shoot my brother first. The sheer malice of it, to want a good horse shot just because she thinks it killed her husband."

Now she'd taken that frost-rose face away, my mind was moving again, faster than poor Harry's.

"I don't think that's the game."

"Then what is it? For pity's sake, what is she at?"

"I think I know. I really think I see it. Harry, you should see it too."

"I've got no time for guessing games. The thing is now, I've got to get that horse away before . . ."

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"Leave it where it is."

"I can't do that. If she comes back in the morning and . . ."

"She won't do that. Now listen, you know this town. Is there a public house where all the grooms drink?"

" 'Course there is, The Three Tuns, but . . ."

"Will it still be open this time of night?" He nodded. "Then get over there as quick as you can and tell everybody who'll listen what's just happened, only don't let them know her name. Tell them you're going to shoot the horse first thing in the morning, then come back here."

He looked at me, snatched up his hat from the tack room, and went at a run.

There was an empty box next to the Arab. We spread rugs on the straw by the light of a candle lantern and lay down. Aware of our presence, the white horse snorted and fidgeted on the other side of the partition. Harry had got back from The Three Tuns at about midnight, with beer on his breath and a gleam in his eye.

"Every household from here to Swindon will know about it by morning."

"Did anybody ask questions?"

"Plenty, but I only answered what I wanted to." He pressed something metallic against my hand. "Pistols, in case we need them. Is this person you're expecting dangerous?"

"I should say not to us. I don't know."

Through the short night, between sleeping and waking, he was trying to make me tell him a name. Wait and see, I said, or guess. He knew all that I knew. By half-past three in the morning a pale light was coming in through the half door of the box. The horses in the main yard began to shuffle their straw and whinny. From the box beside us the Arab responded with gentle whickering sounds. I felt Harry's pistol by my side and thought of that pale face.

Then: "It's the door latch."

I hadn't heard it above the horse sounds, but Harry's hearing is acute as an animal's. He signed to me to be quiet and listen and I heard steps coming across the yard. To the horses at that time of the morning a human being signaled the first feed, and the whinnying became a fanfare. The steps hesitated at the onslaught then came on faster, almost running round the corner towards us. We were both on our feet and Harry was bounding for the door of the box, pistol in hand. I grabbed his arm and mouthed, "Wait." The

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steps came past us and stopped at the box next-door. The white Arab had been whinnying along with the rest of the chorus but now his tone changed to a squeal of relief and recognition. Then there was a bolt being drawn, a man's voice making wordless, soothing sounds, and the click of a buckle tongue on a head collar.

"Now," I said, and Harry and I burst out just as the white Arab was being led from his box. The man on the end of the leading rope looked at first as if he intended to make a run for it, taking the horse with him, but then he looked at our pistols and stood stock still. His face was as white as hers had been, emphasizing the likeness.

"I think," I said, "your sister has bought the horse."

"You had no right to sell him. Talisman is mine."

He recovered his nerve and stood very upright at the stallion's head. He was a good-looking young man, though a shade too fine and highly strung, like the horse itself. It struck me that he looked like a young knight from the works of the poet laureate, Mr. Alfred Tennyson, and that he was possibly conscious of that fact.

"He's a horse that killed a man," Harry said. I don't know if he believed it or was trying to put young Clawson at a disadvantage. The young man practically came to attention.

"Talisman isn't guilty of killing him. I am."

"Suppose," I said, "you come inside and tell us about it."

With Talisman back in his box and the three of us sitting in Harry's cramped little den, it was hard for the young fellow to go on being noble. He told his story straightforwardly enough once he realised that I'd guessed it anyway. The point I had to help him over was the centre of it all—those twice-weekly visits by Sir Percy to my lady of the butcher's bill. Young Clawson was ashamed of a father who'd married off his sister for money and that shame turned to raging disgust when news got to him that the brute couldn't even be faithful to her. He was in his final term at Oxford when he heard (well provided with money and horses by that same mercenary father, but that's by the by). He'd taken Talisman from his stable and ridden two days from Oxford to Maybridge to give his sister's lecherous husband a piece of his virtuous young mind.

"I knew he'd be going to that woman on the Tuesday evening. Talisman and I waited on the edge of his grounds, near the lake.

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All I meant to do was reason with him, make him turn back and beg Emily on his knees for forgiveness."

Harry made a noise that might have been a suppressed sneeze from the hay dust.

"He came riding along in the dusk on that mare of his. I went through the gate and rode towards him. He must have panicked. He tried to gallop away from us, but there's no speed in that mare and he rode like a sack of coals. When he heard us gaining on him he turned her into the lake, or perhaps she bolted that way, and up onto the island. We followed. The mare shied away from us. He fell and cracked his head against a statue. I took his mare and rode away. I thought Talisman would follow, but he didn't."

He was panting a little, even from telling it. Then he took a long breath and looked at me.

"So now you have it. I am guilty of the death of Sir Percy Whitton and you can't shoot the horse for it. Now, sir, if you would be kind enough to give me the loan of your pistol for a few minutes . . ."

I almost wished I had Excalibur to give him. Instead, I put on a very steely air.

"That's all very well, Mr. Clawson, but you haven't told us the truth. The point you've left out of your story is that you yourself were overcome by brute, animal lust."

Another explosive sneeze from Harry and a "Sir!" from Clawson, equally explosive. He glared, and I think he'd have challenged me if duelling weren't out of fashion, but he had to listen.

"I've no doubt you're a fine horseman, but even a fine horseman couldn't have induced that Arab to swim into a lake. Only one power on earth could make him do that, and she's standing in a loose box in this yard."

"By God," said Harry, "Sir Percy's mare. A mare in season."

"A case of man proposes but horse deposes. Oh, I believe you about the first part of your story, Mr. Clawson. But both your horses had interests that were nothing to do with your concerns. The female fled, the male followed and had his way with her. In the grip of that force of nature there was nothing whatsoever that either of you could do about it. In short, you were bolted with too."

In confessing to murder, young Clawson had been a picture of dignity and control. Now he went as red as a schoolboy and hung his head. I went on more gently.

"While your Talisman was having his way, Sir Percy fell off the mare and cracked his head on the plinth." (Paying, with ghastly

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appropriateness, a final tribute to Venus, though I didn't add that at the time.) "When you found he was dead, you panicked. Your own horse—once his appetite was sated—wouldn't cross the water back again in cold blood even for you. You took the mare and swam her to land, hoping he'd follow, just as you said. I'm right, aren't I?"

He murmured yes without looking up. I put a hand on his shoulder.

"You mustn't blame your sister for wanting the horse killed. The moment they told her about him she knew he was yours. She was only trying to protect you. Now, I suggest you start on your way back to Oxford before people are up and about. You can write to her from there."

Harry led out Talisman and held the stirrup while young Clawson mounted. I said, standing close to the horse's shoulder:

"Forget it all now. You meant no harm, and nobody will know about it from me."

We opened the gates for him and stood watching while they rode away across the deserted market square, the rider motionless, the horse looking like something going back into a legend. When they were out of sight Harry went back across the yard and stood looking over the half door at Sir Percy's cushion-quiet mare.

"Wonder if she took. Could be a good foal with that Arab blood." I suggested he might make an offer for her to the young widow when he took her fifty guineas back, but knowing Harry, thought it unlikely that the lady would ever see her money again or her husband's mare at all. ●

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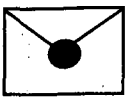

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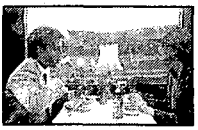

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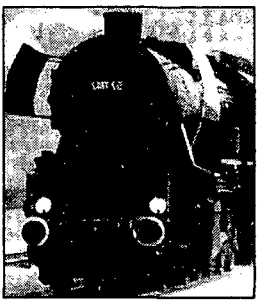

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

BLUE IS FOR BOYS

by Janet Bonellie

The clinic's waiting room was filled with pink and blue furniture, a window ledge of stuffed animals, and a cork bulletin board covered with Polaroids of babies and proud parents. Bert felt slightly uncomfortable, but he smiled for Joan's sake. They were early. That was for Joan's sake too.

"Let's sit down, love," he said, but she was already at the window, gently touching the toys. Bert studied the bulletin board. He'd heard Joan say every new baby was beautiful, and judging from the pictures it seemed to be true. Then he looked at the adults. Each set of parents stared straight into the camera lens making wide, smiling mouths. Bert thought some of the smiles looked as if they'd been there long before the camera took aim, and might still be fixed there long after, and some of the pale eyes were as grey and flat as wet stones. A few of the women held their babies awkwardly, as if they were bundles of laundry or badly wrapped parcels.

"Mr. and Mrs. Potter? You can go in now." The nurse matched the room with a pink and blue uniform and a headful of bright yellow curls.

"Come on, Joanie," said Bert.

Janet Bonellie is a Canadian journalist who also writes radio scripts for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "Blue is for Boys" is her first paid fiction publication for a national magazine. The story is set in London, the author's favorite city next to her hometown—Toronto. ✝

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She walked into the curve of his arm. "Isn't it exciting?"

"It is," he said, noticing that the nurse held a camera in her small pink hands.

Dr. Hesketh's office made Bert feel a lot better. It was sober and sensible with lots of books and diplomas. Dr. Hesketh himself made Bert feel better. He was tall and ascetic with the long, manicured fingers of a surgeon.

"Well, well," he said. "The great day has arrived."

"Right," said Bert.

And it was right. Everything was happening just as they'd planned: just as they'd been promised after years of broken promises and aborted plans; years of hoping, only to see Joan's heartbreak when the hope was gone; years of filling out forms and making appointments and answering questions so private that sometimes Bert felt like punching their inquisitors in the mouth; then waiting for weeks, months, a year once, just to be told that they didn't qualify. It was always the same answer. Only the voices were different.

"It's my fault!" cried Joan.

"Balls," said Bert. "You'd think with so many homeless kids in the world it'd pay them to ease up."

"I guess they're just being careful," said Joan.

"They're just being too bloody fussy," said Bert, and he'd wink at her to stop the tears filling her sad flat eyes. Then someone told them about Dr. Hesketh and the clinic known as Babyland.

"He'll be with us in a moment," said the doctor. "Are you all prepared at home?"

"Bet on it," smiled Bert. "Joan here has enough baby clothes to outfit another set of Dionne quints and I've been doing my reading."

"What are you going to call him?" asked the doctor.

"Buster," said Joan.

"Albert Harley Potter," said Bert. And then the pink and blue nurse came in carrying a fuzzy blue bundle.

"Allow me to introduce Albert Harley Potter," said Dr. Hesketh, "or Buster—if you will." He patted Joan kindly on the shoulder and Bert was grateful for that.

"Well, will you look at him!" he cried. "You were right, Joanie. All new babies are beautiful!"

Joan took the blue bundle in her arms, a flashbulb popped, and they bore their long-awaited son into the street.

Hesketh watched them from the window. "Another pair of happy clients," he said.

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"It makes you feel good just to see their faces," said the nurse. "Did you get an opportunity to talk to Mr. Potter alone?"

"Of course I did," answered the doctor. "I was completely straightforward. At the least sign of a problem, I told him, bring the child back and we'll replace the microchip." He looked round at the nurse, but she was already tacking her latest Polaroid to the bulletin board.

It was a few weeks before anyone really saw Buster (for that's what they called him) but nobody minded. Bert's mother and Joan's aunt and various cousins and the neighbors all understood that people need some private time with a new baby. It's a real adjustment for a couple who've had it their own way for years. There's formula to mix, and diapers to wash, and decisions to make about how the days have to change. It's a whole new script and parents have to get used to the parts they're going to play. Then, there's the baby himself, who might decide night's more interesting than day, or the parent who doesn't feel like holding him is the only one he likes.

However, none of this was a problem with Buster. He was perfect. He slept the unbroken sleep of the innocent. He sucked down the evil-smelling formula as if it were nectar, and he smiled all the time. He also watched every move Bert and Joan made with the brightest, bluest eyes they'd ever seen.

"Look," said Joan, "he's watching us." She smiled and waved whenever she passed the crib. She sang songs. "He listens to me," she said. Bert was delighted and relieved. Buster was an angel.

When Joan forgot to feed him he didn't cry. When she left him unattended on his changing table he didn't fall off. He just directed an unblinking stare into her own clouded eyes until she brought him a bottle or moved him to a safer place.

After the third week of assuring themselves that he wouldn't break or bruise, Bert invited everyone over. His mother, long resigned to a life without grandchildren, was ecstatic. "He looks like you," she said to her strapping son, even though she knew it was coincidence. And Joan's aunt praised Buster's curly hair and long eyelashes. "It's a sin for a boy to be so beautiful," she gushed. The cousins brought armloads of toys and the neighbors offered to babysit. Buster's introduction to society was a smashing success.

That night, after everyone had gone, dishes washed, Buster bathed and tucked into his blue crib, Joan was propped up against her bed pillow. Bert caught her eye in the mirror. She looked angry.

"What's up, love?" he asked. "Everything was great."

Joan twisted her fingers and shot an odd, flat-eyed glance

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into a corner. "Buster swore at me," she said.

A shadow seemed to cover the room and Bert's heart fell. He held his dear, childlike wife by the chin and aimed his own bright eyes at her dull ones. "Imagination, love," he whispered. "Like other times. Only imagination."

Easter Sunday was beautiful. The sun shone and flowering trees filled London's squares with blossoms, pink and white. "You've brought the weather from Miami!" shopkeepers called to the American tourists. Bert and Joan came into town on the bus and headed for St. Paul's. Buster's first Easter seemed to warrant a special service, although they hung back and sat in the last row in case some infant need required an impromptu exit. Buster was dazzling in blue. Every female relative who could knit or crochet practiced her craft in the color that matched his eyes. He was a picture. Bert was proud.

"Best day of my life," said Bert.

"Best of mine," said Joan, squinting with a puzzled expression at the newly cleaned interior of St. Paul's, prepared for the World War II anniversary service. She wandered back to the entrance where a kiosk sold booklets about the building. Buster hung awkwardly upside down in the bend of her elbow.

Bert lunged after her before a tour bus emptied its bodies beside her.

"Take care of the little bugger—" he laughed shakily "—right side up." Joan turned her son round halfheartedly and scanned the souvenirs. Buster glared at Bert with a hint of pure venom, but when a man hung with cameras and a South Carolina accent said, "Ain't he cute!", the baby grinned and blew a saliva bubble in open friendship. Bert felt a twinge of nausea. Something was wrong, but Dr. Hesketh's advice rang in his ears: a possible problem in programming. Anger when there should be laughter. Slight spasms. Nothing serious. Bert breathed deeply and joined the first hymn in full voice.

After the service they took snapshots in Paternoster Square and headed for home. Bert was just settling down in the bus's upper deck when he heard a tiny voice say to the retreating conductor, "Frigging renter, forty p. more than we should've paid."

"There's a definite problem," said Bert to the pink and blue nurse, "I must speak with Dr. Hesketh—now."

The nurse looked petulant, but Bert was ushered into the doc-

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tor's academic interior without hesitation. Hesketh sat at a PC, fingering the keyboard as gently as a musician at a museum clavichord. He did not look up.

"Worries, are there?" he said.

"Nothing I can put my finger on," said Bert, subdued, "but my wife gives me her word she heard the infant swear and I—" (hands in pockets and eyes on the carpet) "—I believe I heard him speak to a bus conductor in an adult way. We're uncomfortable. Tell us what to do."

Dr. Hesketh swung round in his chair and caught Bert eye to eye. His own eyes were grey, like the parents in the pictures, but they were bright—blazing even—sparkling with intelligence. "You people," he said, "you people forget the boy is a computer. You watch him laugh and sleep, eat and pee, and you ultimately believe you have a real baby. What you have, what I told you you have, Mr. Potter, is a remarkably lifelike clone of a human infant. However, you do not have the reality.

"Buster is a miracle of modern technology that makes it possible for people like you to enjoy parenthood when no other option is open to you. He will grow, slower than most, but he will grow. He will become a little boy and bring Mrs. Potter a fulfillment that her handicap would otherwise deny her." He leaned back and tented his long, delicate fingers. "What you're experiencing is evidence of Buster's software program. He has enough bytes to ultimately give him a vocabulary of twelve hundred words." The doctor coughed apologetically. "The number of bytes is in direct ratio to the mental capacity of the parent who spends the most time with him. Your wife, Mr. Potter, has limited conversational ability. We can't have her own child outranking her, can we?"

"No," said Bert in a small voice.

Hesketh went on. "What we cannot control are the words Buster picks up. His vocabulary will develop from where you take him and what he hears. Experiment. See if I'm right."

"Happy families," he called cheerfully as Bert left the office. "Happy families!"

The following weekend Bert took Buster to the National Gallery and fell in behind a group of schoolchildren.

"Young voices," he thought to himself, "young conversation." He watched in amazement as Buster stared at the little mouths with the intensity of a lipreader.

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That evening Joan played with Buster in his bath. She sent a plastic duck skimming across the water and her son sent it back.

"Bert?" she called suddenly through the open door. "Who's Canaletto? One of your mates?"

Bert gulped and took two aspirins. It was not going to be easy.

The flower-filled spring that had displayed itself so beautifully on Easter Sunday withdrew and a chill settled in the air. Winter coats came out again and the few remaining city robins flew off to Richmond. Buster was propped up in his blue pram looking a lot like one of the fluffy Teddy bears in the Babyland office. He'd been remarkably silent that week and Bert was almost grateful. They wandered aimlessly across the heath. In the distance a few hardy souls were flying kites. Joan picked daisies. Bert lit a Woodbine. Suddenly Buster banged his tiny fists against the sides of his pram.

"I'll kill the bastard," he piped. "I'll break his bloody neck!" Bert dropped his cigarette. Thankfully, Joan was too far away to hear. He stared at the angelic face that was his child's.

"Where did you hear that?" he choked. "Who's been talking to you?"

Buster smirked. "Break his bleeding neck," he repeated. "See if I don't!" Then he turned his head into his pillow and fell asleep.

It was almost midnight and Bert held Joan's hands across the kitchen table. "We'll take him back," he said gently. "We'll trade him in—like a car. And next time we'll just be more careful—about where we go—who he talks to."

Joan's eyes were as empty as unmarked paper. "He's ours," she said. "For better or worse. No one sent me back, did they?"

Bert covered his face. "Do what I say, love," he moaned. "Do what I say."

She stood up, gathering the thread of her thoughts. "It's time for Buster's bottle. He likes a late-night snack. He told me so."

In the moonlit pool of their bed Bert gave in. He usually did. Joan's slow stealth through the labyrinth of language didn't affect her performance as his wife. "You've got sign language down pat," he'd say, panting. Then she would smile and seal their partnership with a noisy kiss.

That night, "I've been thinking," said Bert. "What if we delete the bad bits. What if we find out how to abort the file." Joan stared at him in horror. "No, love," he said, "I don't mean that kind of abort. Besides, he's already here, isn't he? I just mean there must be some

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way we can wipe out the violence. Input new stuff so he'll be the angel he looks like." Finally, Bert rolled over and buried his face beside her. When he began to snore, Joan slipped out of the blankets and, for the first time, went into the nursery to make sure Buster was all right.

"I'm just crazy about you," she whispered to the little blue crib.

"Ditto," said Buster.

Spring came back with a vengeance. Barren yards became flowerbeds. Children skipped and sang, and the gentlemen of Whitehall left their umbrellas at home. By the time Buster was due for his mid-year checkup he could recite "The Owl and the Pussycat," multiply by two, and dismantle an alarm clock. Bert's mother and Joan's aunt were startled, to say the least.

"He's still so tiny," said Bert's mum. "His progress is so—different."

Joan's aunt was more pragmatic. "It's Fate evening the balance," she announced. "Joan has her problems. Now she's going to be the mother of a genius." Buster's first birthday present was a bright blue velveteen suit with "I'm a Star" embroidered over his heart.

The one sober note in his development was Joan. As Buster's abilities exploded, she seemed to decline. Always an adequate cook, she forgot how the stove worked and Bert took on making meals. Since their marriage, she'd enjoyed the telly. It didn't really matter what was on as long as the picture was busy and colorful. Now nothing really caught her attention, although occasionally, when the true-life crime reports came on, Bert saw her eyes slanting towards the screen. "Pretty picture they have on their wall," she'd say as the police removed the bodies from a sitting room in Leeds. Bert worried.

"I told you before," he said in Dr. Hesketh's office, "I can't pin it down but something's off. It's like Buster drains her energy. He thrives. She fades away. She's a gentle girl, Doctor. Passive as a post if it be the truth. But never this quiet. Not like now." He was rarely so outspoken, but on the previous day one of the neighbors had referred to Buster as "an odd little tyke" and a cousin had called him "funny peculiar."

Dr. Hesketh stood tall against his window and he sighed a long, patient sigh.

"You still want perfection," he said, "and perfection is not the lot of a parent. Look about you, Mr. Potter. Fine families from fine homes breed children who sleep in the streets. Oxford dons have offspring who prefer hard labor. Good Baptists have bad boys and

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petty thieves have poets. There is no reason in parenthood. There is no logic." He cleared his throat and leaned forward. "Your distress is normal and your fears are part of life."

Bert felt humbled.

"Now as for your wife, she's feeling the strain any mother feels. She wants the perfect union with her young and yet she's conscious of losing contact. It happens to all of us. Although in Mrs. Potter's case, contact is a bit of a challenge at best." He took a delicately marbleized fountain pen from his pocket and addressed it to a pad of embossed paper. "Take this to your chemist and give her one tablet a day. If she fears drugs, mash it up in orange juice or a bottle of pop. I guarantee you'll see a difference." He washed his hands in the dry air. "Now, Mr. Potter, I have other clients waiting."

Subdued almost to somnambulism, Bert passed through the pink and blue waiting room. A short, ferretlike man with furtive eyes gripped the arm of a woman holding a plastic baby doll.

"Come along," said the nurse. "We'll get you a real doll to play with, shall we?"

Through the summer months things seemed to settle down. Joan's pills appeared to work, and she made the evening meals with pep and imagination. Buster bloomed and Bert had to admit it was a laugh watching him discover solid food. He liked minced lamb and pudding but he sloshed strained peas round his tongue like someone who'd just discovered a particularly nasty foreign object in their mouth. He ate rusks like an addict and by the end of August he had six teeth. His vocabulary took a pleasant turn and Bert stopped flinching when they were out in crowds. "Nice dog," Buster beamed at a passing canine. "Good dog." When he greeted Bert's entrance into the flat with, "Hello, Dad. Hard day?", Bert was almost touched.

One evening he was sitting watching the telly with Joan. The true-crime program centered on an old couple in Hampstead whose lives had been turned upside down by a particularly violent intruder. The man had required nineteen stitches to close his head. The wife had her eyes and mouth covered with electrician's tape while she listened to her home being stripped of its treasures. She would never be the same again.

"Rotten sods," said Bert, "picking on people that age."

Joan was limp in his arms. "Maybe they had it coming," she said.

Bert grew cold. "You don't mean that, love. You can't mean that."

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She turned her glassy stare at him. "It's a rerun," she said, "we saw it the other day and Buster said, 'Maybe they had it coming.' "

A snuffling noise from the nursery brought her to her feet. "Snack time," she chimed and disappeared through the door.

The next day was Friday. Their usual routine was a good supper and a plan laid out for a weekend excursion, but Bert couldn't bring himself to get on the home-bound bus. He walked for more than an hour. Finally, as twilight turned purple, he found himself in Covent Garden. A Punch and Judy show played to a circle of laughing faces. Punch demanded his rights and Judy bashed him on the head. Bert wept. It was ten o'clock when he finally turned into his own doorway and joined Joan.

"All square then?" he said with forced cheer. The flat was silent. "Junior packed it in?" he said. "Then let's have ourselves a bit of private time, my love." He got out the sherry bottle and filled two glasses. "Bottoms up," he said and drained his. Joan drained hers too. She liked sherry. She asked for another. And Bert saw, with a thin sliver of hope, that her face softened prettily and her pale eyes almost glowed. He took her radiance for encouragement and sat facing her, knee to knee.

"Joanie, my love," he said, "we've had our ups and downs. We know times can be tough and need to be muddled through. Remember our first year? It was a disaster! But funny really. Remember when you sent all my clothes to some Third World country because the bloke on the telly said they needed donations? Remember that?" He gripped her hands. "Remember when I told you I wasn't angry because it got rid of all those rotten sweaters my mum made me? It was a laugh, wasn't it? Sometimes when bad things happen we can see the laughs together, can't we?" Tears trickled down his cheek. Joan wiped them off with a gentle finger.

"We're a team, love," he went on. "We're solid, you and I. Better or worse. Bert and Joan. No stopping us when we get our skates on."

Joan leaned towards him, and he closed his eyes and presented his mouth. But she just peered round. "Any sherry left?" she said.

"Look, Joan." He coughed. "Buster's been an experience. An experiment like kids do at school, and if it doesn't work you get new supplies and try again until you get it right." Bert stood up and braced himself on the kitchen counter, making himself teacherlike to drive his point home. "We'll take Buster back and get another. New supplies. Perhaps a girl, Joanie. A little Beryl Potter—all in pink."

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A tiny cry broke the air. "I'll check," he said grimly.

A night-light in the shape of a clown's face touched the nursery walls. Bert leaned over the pale blue crib. "Go to sleep, Buster," he said. "We'll sort things out in the morning." The angel face was damp with sleep and the long, velvet lashes trembled.

"A thin, sharp knife—or maybe an ice pick," said Buster. "Poison's too good for him."

Bert never showed temper. That's why his mother and Joan's aunt and the cousins and the neighbors thought the marriage had a chance. He was placid and kind, saw Joan's bright spots and coasted through the dull ones, held her hand a lot, talked for both of them. That night Bert lost it.

"He's a monster!" Bert cried. "The brat's a frigging monster!" Tears streamed and his face turned red. "I don't know where he picked it all up, but he's going back, Joanie. We're not rearing a bloody freak, computer or no computer!"

He poured another glass of sherry, drank it back, and smashed the glass against the sink. It shattered.

Joan was amazingly calm. She tilted her head and her eyes widened into twin pools of mist. "Why do you hate him?" she said in a small voice. "He's a perfect love."

"Love?" shrieked Bert. "Love? He's programmed for trouble. He's heard horrors from someone and they've become part of him. He talks of breaking people's necks, Joanie. He talks about knives and poison. He's a menace. God help the world when he learns to walk!" Then Bert slumped to the floor, curled up like a baby, whimpering even. "Joanie," he moaned, "you have to give him up."

"Oh, I can't do that," said Joan in an amazingly clear voice. "I can't give up my son, Bert." He crept towards her. Crawled actually. Gripped her knees and pressed his face into her lap.

"Joanie, love," he sobbed, "you and I—we'll be all right. But not with him." And then a tiny sound came from the doorway and Bert looked up. It was Buster, taller than Bert thought he was because he'd never seen the baby standing, legs apart Henry the Eighth style, hands on hips.

"Break his bleeding neck," said Buster, smiling his angel smile and flashing his bright blue eyes.

The last thing Bert saw was Joan advancing towards him with a sharp, bright object in her hands. And then, just as she put his lights out forever, he knew who Buster had been talking to.●

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The Problem of the Miraculous Jar

by Edward D. Hoch

Diagnosis:Impossible, the long-awaited collection of Dr. Sam Hawthorne stories published by Crippen and Landru Publishers, is winging its way to mystery bookstores as this issue goes to press. Interested readers without a mystery bookstore in their area can obtain copies directly from the publisher at P. O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23005-9315. †

The war was still a long way from Northmont in November of 1939 (Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his visitor after the drinks had been poured), and to tell the truth there were those who never thought it would amount to much, at least in the beginning. Life went on pretty much as it had before Hitler's invasion of Poland, even though the entry of England and France into the conflict had caused some in the press to start referring to "World War II." Most folks around the country were more stirred up about the president's attempt to break with tradition and move Thanksgiving Day ahead a week on the calendar.

Two of our more prominent citizens, Proctor Hall and his wife Mildred, had spent the months of September and October touring the Mediterranean region, a trip planned before the outbreak of European hostilities. There was some concern for their safety but they were far from the region of conflict. Hall, a man still in his forties, had inherited one of the big tobacco farms near Northmont, though he left its daily operations to Jason Sennick, a lumbering hulk of a man who managed the place. Hall seemed only too happy

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to be a gentleman farmer, and when he and Mildred weren't traveling, they were active in community and church affairs.

I'd treated her for some minor female ailments over the years so it wasn't too surprising that my nurse Mary Best and I were invited to a welcoming party their friend Rita Perkins threw for their return. Rita was director of the church choir and also a patient of mine. Mildred sang with them when she was at home, and she and Rita had become close friends. They were both in their late thirties, both attractive in their own way. Mildred was the traveler, the sophisticate, while Rita was the girl next door who'd never left home. This was quite literally true, since she still lived in the family homestead following the deaths of both parents.

The party was on a Sunday afternoon in early November, when the temperature had dropped unexpectedly into the low thirties and brief flurries of snow were in the air. Because Rita's house just off the town square was relatively small, there were only ten people invited. Besides Mary and me, there were the Halls, Rita, Jason Sennick, the minister and his wife, and Bud and Doris Clark, a young couple who'd become friendly with the Halls. When we walked in everyone was chattering and I saw we were the last arrivals. While Mary Best hurried over to welcome Mildred back, I said hello to Proctor. He was just lighting a cigar so I avoided the seat next to him and settled into an empty chair next to the Reverend Mooney. He was Episcopalian, but his faint Northern Irish brogue made some strangers take him for Catholic.

"How are you, Dr. Hawthorne?" he asked, his cheeks as ruddy as if he'd been out in the wind.

"I got through the summer."

"Haven't seen you lately."

I knew he meant he hadn't seen me in church lately. We often passed each other in the corridors of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, going about our separate callings. "It's been a busy time."

"Eliza was just saying the other day we should have you for dinner."

Eliza Mooney had always seemed a bit daring for a small-town minister's wife. She prided herself on keeping up with the latest fashions and probably didn't approve of the tight sweater and skirt Mildred Hall was wearing. Now, as she bent across her husband to join in the conversation, I couldn't help looking down the front of her low-cut dress. "By all means, Dr. Sam! You must join

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us at the rectory," she gushed. "Perhaps some night later this week? You may bring Mary Best if you wish."

For many in the town, an invitation extended to me had come to include my nurse. I viewed the whole thing with amusement and had been startled to see Mary blush the one time I'd attempted to kid her about it. "I'll check my schedule and phone you tomorrow," I promised.

We became aware that the others had ceased talking to listen to the world travelers, and as Rita Perkins went around pouring tea and passing cookies Mildred Hall was answering Bud Clark's questions about the impact of the war. Clark and his pretty blond wife were in their mid twenties, two decades younger than most of the others. "On our ship we had very little knowledge of what was happening in Europe," Mildred said. "We had just left port on September first, when Hitler invaded Poland, and we heard virtually no news." She took a sip of tea and complimented their hostess. "We did find in Palestine that Jewish immigration has swelled in the past decade because of the threat from Hitler. As we traveled around the country on our tour bus we found many of the Jewish shopkeepers to be deeply concerned about the effects of war on their relatives still in Poland."

Reverend Mooney smiled, trying to shift the conversation into a more uplifting channel. "Did you visit any Christian shrines in the Holy Land?"

"We did indeed," her husband took over. Proctor Hall had close-cropped steely gray hair and wore thin-rimmed glasses that went well with his face. He was a handsome man with a face almost the color of the tobacco others grew for him. "We saw Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Nazareth, and even took a side trip to Cana where Jesus performed the first miracle at the wedding feast."

"What sort of place is that?" Rita wanted to know, having finished her hostess chores for the moment. "I've always been intrigued by the story of the water being changed into wine."

"It's a small town, merely a suburb of Nazareth. They are quite close." He reached beneath his chair and produced a small package wrapped in fancy paper. "In fact, Rita, Mildred and I brought you back a special gift from Cana. I'm sorry we couldn't bring them for everyone."

"What is it?" the choir director wondered, carefully unwrapping it. Inside was a stoneware jar about six inches high, resembling in

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miniature those familiar Biblical receptacles for carrying oil, wine, and water. "Oh, how lovely!"

"It's a water jar from Cana," Mildred Hall explained. "The little shop girl who sold it to us insisted it was identical to those used in the miracle. They had large ones too, holding fifteen to twenty-five gallons like the originals, but she assured us these smaller ones were just as authentic."

"You can fill it with water, Rita, and turn it into wine," Proctor told her with a chuckle, opening a pack of cigarettes.

"Oh, I wouldn't," she insisted. "That would be a sacrilege, wouldn't it?"

Everyone laughed and Rita placed the Cana water jar on the tray with the teapot. It was Jason Sennick, the farm manager, who'd been silent till now, who broke the mood of the moment. "You sure you didn't buy that at some gift shop in New York City?"

Sennick was a large, crusty man whose occasional disrespect seemed to mask a feeling of insecurity. But Mildred Hall had come prepared for doubters. She opened her purse and produced a copy of their customs declaration. "There! See for yourself!" She pointed to a line that read *Cana stoneware, weight 28 oz., value $25.00.*

"Twenty-five dollars!" Rita Perkins exclaimed. "You shouldn't have spent so much! I'll treasure it always."

"Try filling it with water," Sennick suggested. "We'll have the reverend say a prayer over it and see if it changes into wine."

Reverend Mooney scowled to show his displeasure with the farm manager's words but he did reach out to examine the Cana relic. The reddish brown stoneware jar, hard and opaque, bulged at the sides and had a fairly wide mouth. I guessed it might hold nearly a quart of water. Mooney's wife Eliza leaned over to examine it with him. She sang in the church choir too, and was forever organizing the Northmont ladies to aid in one good cause or another. On occasion she'd even been known to give them fashion tips, which brought a silent smirk from Mary Best.

"Well," Doris Clark said, jumping to her feet, "if no one's going to fill it with water, I will!" The minister smiled indulgently and passed it to her. Doris had a youthful verve that seemed to please Proctor Hall. I'd noticed when they were together that his eyes were often on her face, even when she wasn't speaking.

She went into the kitchen and filled the stoneware jar with tap

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water, then brought it in and set it on the table in front of Rita Perkins. "Your wine, miss."

Everyone laughed, but Rita decided she'd wait before savoring it. "How long did it take at Cana?" she asked nervously. "We don't know, do we?"

It was Mary Best who said, quite innocently, "This is almost like a wedding. All we need are the bride and groom."

That was when Rita Perkins fainted.

She was revived quickly enough with some smelling salts I always carried with me. "I—I must be coming down with something," she stammered. "Please forgive me."

Everyone was talking at once, assuring her she should lie down and rest. The Clarks were already on their feet, preparing to leave. "It's the change of seasons," Bud assured her. "Doris always gets a cold this time of year."

"Perhaps the wine will help you," Jason Sennick suggested, offering her the stoneware jar with a touch of his ironic humor.

She seemed to play along and took a sip, then shook her head. "It's only water. Please don't go yet, people. Here, I'll make a fresh pot of tea."

Out of politeness we stayed another twenty minutes, listening to Mildred and Proctor relate their adventures on the Greek islands and some of their other stops. Then the Clarks insisted they really had to go, and the rest quickly followed. Rita saw them to the door and made arrangements for choir practice the following afternoon with Mildred and Eliza. Proctor took Rita aside to thank her for the party, and then he and Mildred departed. Mary and I lingered till last so I could determine how Rita was feeling.

"It was nothing," she insisted. "Just a passing lightheadedness."

"People don't faint for no reason," I told her. "Was it something someone said?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

"Something you ate?" I persisted.

"No." She smiled at me. "You're too much the doctor, Sam."

"All right," I said with a sigh. "But promise me you'll phone if you have any pains or dizziness. I'll come right over."

"I'll remember that, but I'm sure I'll be all right."

As we were leaving I paused and picked up the stoneware jar. "I wonder if the water has turned into wine yet." I took a sip, but it was still water.

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She showed us out and I heard her bolt the front door behind us. Obviously Rita was planning to stay in for the rest of the day, which was probably wise. A light snow with big flakes had started to fall more steadily.

"What do you think?" Mary asked as we got into my Buick. "Will she be all right?"

"I hope so. She seems better."

The afternoon's outing had proven shorter than planned, but Mary pleaded work to do at home so I dropped her at the double house she rented near the hospital. Watching her walk up the steps to her porch, I noticed the shapely legs that were usually hidden by her white uniform and stockings. Mary had been with me four years and I'd never regretted hiring her.

When I drove up to my own house I had a surprise waiting. Burly Jason Sennick was seated out front in his truck, ignoring the falling snowflakes which were coating the vehicle. My first thought was that he'd come for some sort of medical attention, though he wasn't one of my patients. "Hello, Jason. What can I do for you?"

A good workman, he tended to be clumsy at conversation and social intercourse. "Can I come in, Doc?"

"Certainly." I led him into the house and offered him a chair.

"I was a bit outta line this afternoon, pokin' fun at the reverend and suggesting he could pray over that jar of water."

"I think we all took it in the right way," I assured him, "as a little joke."

"You don't think that upset Rita and made her faint?"

"No, it was some minutes later when she was taken ill, after my nurse Mary mentioned a wedding and needing a bride and groom." As I spoke the words I was remembering the sudden draining of color from Rita's face, wondering if Mary's words had somehow caused the reaction.

"What I really came to you about was Reverend Mooney's wife Eliza. I swear, Doc, the woman is tryin' to seduce me! She leans over with those low-cut dresses and shows her breasts every chance she gets."

I had to laugh at that. "Believe me, Jason, you're not alone. That's just the way she behaves with men. I don't even know if she's conscious of the effect she has."

"I hate being around her because of the thoughts I have."

"You should talk to your minister or priest about it, not to me."

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"Reverend Mooney is my minister."

"Oh."

"What am I gonna do, tell him his wife is seducing me?"

That this burly man whom I hardly knew had come to me with his confession left me at a momentary loss for words. Finally I suggested, "Try not being in her company, Jason. I know you have to see her during the church service when she sings in the choir, but you should be able to avoid her at other times." I gave a little shrug. "That's all I can tell you."

"There's no kind of pill I could take?"

"You don't need a pill, just some willpower."

He didn't seem completely satisfied but he accepted it. "Thanks for your time, Doc."

"I hope I did some good. Feel free to call me anytime."

After he left I thought about it some more. It was hard to believe his problem was so great as to prompt this unannounced visit, but we never know what goes on in someone else's mind.

About twenty minutes later the telephone rang, and when I picked it up I heard a gasping voice speak my name. "Who is this?" I asked.

"It's Rita Perkins, Sam. I'm terribly dizzy. I drank—" Her voice broke off in a choke.

"I'll be right over!"

I drove fast across town, ignoring the drifting snowflakes still blanketing the road. In ten minutes I was at Rita's house. It was less than an hour since Mary and I had left, and there were no footprints in the fresh dusting of snow. I rang the bell but no one answered. I tried the door but of course it was locked. There was a light burning toward the rear, in the kitchen, and I walked back along the side of the house to the other door, treading on the unmarked snow. That door was locked too, but at least I could see into the kitchen. On the table was the telephone and an empty glass. In the center stood the stoneware jar the Halls had brought home from Cana.

On the floor by the chair was Rita's body.

I smashed the glass in the back-door window, reached through to turn the bolt, and entered the kitchen. Though I knew she was dead, I felt for a pulse, then walked through to the front door to make sure it was still locked and bolted. Turning on lights as I went, I established that all the downstairs windows were latched too. Then I saw a car pulling up out front behind my own. Proctor

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and Mildred Hall got quickly out and I opened the front door for them. Both wore topcoats against the snow and chill. Proctor kept his on but his wife removed her coat and tossed it over a chair. She still had on the tight sweater and skirt she'd worn earlier.

"Sam," Proctor asked, "did she call you too?"

I nodded. "We're too late. She's dead."

Mildred staggered as if from a blow. "Oh my God! I answered the phone and she sounded so sick. I said we'd be right over."

"She's on the kitchen floor," I told them. "Please don't touch anything. I have to call Sheriff Lens."

"The sheriff?" Hall asked, frowning.

"I can detect a faint odor of cyanide. I think she was poisoned."

"You mean she killed herself?" Mildred asked.

I shook my head. "It's doubtful that she'd take poison and then phone you and me for help. I think she was murdered."

We went into the kitchen together and I took the phone off the table and gave the operator Sheriff Lens's home number. When he answered I turned away and said quietly, "Sheriff, this is Sam. Could you get over to Rita Perkins's home right away?"

"What's up, Doc?"

"She's dead. She may have been poisoned."

I hung up and returned the phone to the table. Mildred had gone into the living room but Proctor stood by the body. "This is terrible, Sam. She was like a sister to my wife."

I bent to sniff at the empty glass but there was no trace of the familiar bitter odor. Next I tried the jar from Cana and thought I detected something.

"What is it?" Hall asked, seeing my frown.

I lifted the jar from the edge of the table and brought it to my nostrils, being careful to hold it with my handkerchief and avoid smudging fingerprints. "A definite bouquet, but something else too. It could be cyanide."

"Do you mean—?"

I carefully poured a few drops into the empty glass. "Your stoneware jar has done its job. It's converted water into wine, and poisoned wine at that!"

Sheriff Lens arrived just seconds before his photographer and fingerprint expert. As one who remembered the sheriff's investigative techniques from the 1920s, I was constantly surprised at how much he'd adapted to the changing times. Though some years

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older than me, he was still under fifty, and with his wife's help he'd even managed to slim down a bit.

"What's it look like, Doc?" he asked, moving around the table for a better view of the victim.

"If I had to guess, I'd say cyanide in the wine. It wasn't full strength or she wouldn't have lived long enough to make two phone calls."

"When did you last see her?"

"This afternoon. There were ten of us here, counting Rita." I told him about the gathering and the stoneware gift from Cana.

"You mean people pay money for this junk?" he asked. "They probably make 'em by the hundreds for the tourists."

"Of course, but it's something unique to Cana and they try to cash in on it."

"You say she filled it with water?"

"Actually it was Doris Clark, Bud's wife, who held it under the tap."

"Could she have slipped wine or cyanide into it then?"

I shook my head. "Rita tasted it right away, and I had a swallow as we were leaving. It was water, all right. Not a drop of wine or poison."

Sheriff Lens stepped aside while his fingerprint expert brushed the jar with dark powder. "Who did you see handle this earlier?" he asked me.

"Rita, Doris Clark, and myself. And Reverend Mooney, I think. I handled it again after I found the body, but I was careful to use a handkerchief. I suppose you might find the Halls' prints too, since they gave it to her."

The fingerprint man, a young fellow named Frank whom I'd once treated for whooping cough, spoke up. "Looks like there are no prints at all on this, Sheriff. It's been wiped clean."

I frowned, puzzled by the news. "You'd better have it analyzed, along with the dregs in that empty glass. I did pour a few drops of the wine in there."

I went into the living room where Proctor and Mildred waited in silence. "What can I do?" she asked immediately, getting to her feet. "We feel so helpless."

"You'd better notify Reverend Mooney and the rest who were here today—the Clarks and your farm manager. Sheriff Lens will want to question them all."

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"Of course." She turned to her husband. "We'd better make those calls from home."

On his way out Proctor shook hands with me. "Keep us advised, Sam. This is a terrible thing."

Other deputies were arriving, along with the county coroner. The sheriff came into the living room and said, "Nothing seems to have been taken. It doesn't look like a burglary."

"Burglars don't use poison, Sheriff. And they do leave footprints in the snow. No one entered or left this house after the party guests departed."

At that point I was just beginning to realize how baffling and complex the death of Rita Perkins was becoming.

Sheriff Lens showed up at my office at eleven on Monday morning, carrying lab findings and the coroner's autopsy report. "So soon! It makes me think Northmont is finally part of the twentieth century!"

"These are just preliminary, Doc, but there's something I thought you should know about."

"You found the poison?"

"In the wine, just as you thought," he said, slumping down in the chair opposite my desk.

"Was there any other wine in the house?"

"Not a drop, and we even checked the rubbish for empty bottles. Mildred Hall and Eliza Mooney both insist she never drank."

"So the killer had to bring it."

"Unless it was a miracle, Doc."

"Did the coroner have any guess as to how long she might have lived after ingesting the poison?"

"He thinks it was diluted somewhat. And cyanide salts are slightly slower acting than the liquid form. She could have lived five or ten minutes. Dizziness and convulsions would have been the first symptoms. Certainly she had time enough to make those phone calls. There's something else in his report, though, that's really the interesting part."

"What is it?"

"Rita Perkins was almost three months pregnant."

I sat and stared at Sheriff Lens. "There must be some mistake."

He grinned a little. "Why's that, Doc? 'Cause she wasn't married?"

"Rita sang in the church choir."

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"Yeah. Well, I guess there was another side to her."

"She invited four men to that party yesterday. Maybe she used the occasion to break the news to the father."

"Tell me again who was there besides Proctor Hall."

I counted them off on my fingers. "Jason Sennick, Bud Clark, and Reverend Mooney."

"I guess we can rule out the Reverend."

I let that pass for the moment. "Of course, if one of their wives discovered this affair with Rita, she'd have had a motive too."

He nodded. "They say poison is a woman's weapon. I guess I'd better start questioning all of them."

"While you're at it, Sheriff, find out how any of them could change water into poisoned wine inside a locked house surrounded by unmarked snow."

By afternoon the sun had melted the remains of the previous day's snow and the weather was a bit more seasonable. I drove over to Saint George's, Reverend Mooney's church on the town square. It was an impressive building for a town our size and Mooney himself was playing the organ as I slipped in the rear door. I'd remembered about the scheduled choir practice, not knowing if Rita's death might have postponed it. But a handful of women were clustered near the front of the sanctuary, talking in low tones. I spotted Eliza Mooney at once, and as I walked nearer I realized that the minister's wife had been appointed to replace Rita as the choir leader.

"Mildred," she said to Proctor's wife, "I want you to handle printing the song sheets for Sunday's service. Rita used to do most of these things herself, but it's time we spread the work around."

"I'll be glad to help out."

They both saw me and Eliza said, "Hello, Sam. We're trying to carry on here."

Reverend Mooney ceased his organ practice and came down to join us. "Do you have any news?"

"Sheriff Lens is investigating several angles." I thought it best not to mention the pregnancy quite yet.

It was Mildred Hall who seemed the most concerned. "I suppose Proctor and I are the chief suspects because we brought her that stoneware jar from Cana."

"There are other possibilities," I said, trying to reassure her. Certainly I'd considered the idea of some slow-dissolving inner

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coating that released the poisoned wine into the water after Rita and I had tasted it. The entire scenario seemed a bit fantastic, but I'd asked the sheriff to have his lab run special tests on the jar.

"I hope Sheriff Lens doesn't seriously consider any of us," Mooney said, brushing back his graying hair and passing a protective arm around his wife's waist. The gesture may have been reassuring to her, but he seemed to be calling attention to Eliza as a suspect.

"I wonder if I could speak to you alone, Reverend," I asked.

"Certainly." He released his wife and motioned toward the rear of the church. "These ladies want to get on with their choir practice anyway. Of course they'll be singing at Rita's funeral on Wednesday."

I followed him into the little oak-paneled office around back. There was a traditional print of Jesus behind his desk, and bookshelves crammed with concordances and collections of sermons. I sat down and came right to the point. "Rita Perkins was one of your flock, Reverend. Did she ever tell you she was pregnant?"

He blinked once but did not change his expression. If my words surprised him he hid it well. "You know I can't answer that question, Sam. We don't have a seal of confession like the Catholics, but I regard any conversation about my parishioners' problems to be privileged. I'm sure you feel the same way about your patients."

"You're telling me she did speak with you."

"Not at all. You've jumped to that conclusion."

"Did she name the father?"

He studied my face for almost a minute before replying. Then his answer was the briefest shake of his head. I could take it for what I wanted—a refusal to answer or a negative reply.

"One more thing," I said. "Does Jason Sennick attend your church?"

"He comes occasionally. I wouldn't call him a loyal parishioner."

"And Bud and Doris Clark?"

"They're Catholic. Talk to Father Brewster about them."

I stood up. "Thank you for your time."

We shook hands at the door and he said, "One other thing. I'm lining up pallbearers for the funeral. Could you be one?"

"Certainly."

When I went back out through the church the choir was singing "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."

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Bud Clark was employed by a company that purchased the bulk of Proctor Hall's tobacco output, which was how the two couples had become friendly. Hall had his tobacco grown under great canopies of cheesecloth which covered entire fields, producing the large thin leaves used for cigar wrappers. Our southern New England climate was perfect for such a product, and Hall had become wealthy growing it. I found Bud the following morning in one of the remote fields at the Hall farm, inspecting tobacco leaves damaged by the weekend's unexpected cold and snow.

"I'm afraid this field is lost," Bud was telling Jason Sennick as I walked up to join them. "You stretched the growing season too far this year."

"Well, we got most of it in a few weeks ago. I thought we'd make it with this batch too, based on the weather forecasts."

Bud turned to greet me, extending his hand. "What brings you out in the middle of a tobacco field, Sam?"

"Wanted to chat with you, Bud. They told me at the office you were out here." I turned to acknowledge Sennick's presence. "Tough luck with this field, Jason."

The big man shrugged. "Guess I needed more than luck. I shoulda asked Mooney for some prayers. Hope it doesn't cost me my job."

"Is Proctor upset about it?"

"You might say that. He got back from his trip and never asked me about this field. Figured the leaf was all harvested. I had to break the news to him yesterday."

He and Bud Clark exchanged a few more words and then separated. I stuck with Bud because he was the one I'd come to see. "What's up, Sam?" he asked when we were alone. "Is it about Rita's death?"

"That's right. I'm trying to help Sheriff Lens if I can."

"I don't know a thing about it. Doris and I didn't even know she was dead until yesterday morning."

"How did you find out?"

"Proctor called to tell us."

"The autopsy showed Rita was nearly three months pregnant, Bud."

He seemed truly surprised. "That can't be! Not Rita Perkins. Hell, she was Mooney's choir director, wasn't she?"

"That's no protection against pregnancy."

"Do they know who the father was?"

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"Not yet." I looked him in the eye. "It wasn't you, was it?"

"Me? Sam, the woman was twelve, thirteen years older than me! I hate to speak ill of the dead, but she couldn't hold a candle to my Doris in the looks department. You're barkin' up the wrong tree with that question."

"I had to ask it. Remember Rita's fainting spell at Sunday afternoon's tea party? She fainted just after my nurse Mary said the Cana jar reminded her of the Biblical wedding and all we needed was the bride and groom. I think the baby's father was at the party, and that Rita's sudden thoughts of him, and the strain of her secret pregnancy, caused her to faint."

"That means me or Proctor or Jason, unless you want to include Reverend Mooney too."

"For the moment I'm not leaving anyone out."

"Maybe the pregnancy was too much for a religious woman like her and she took her own life."

"I doubt it," I replied. "She lived long enough to phone the Halls and me, trying to get help. That's not the sort of thing a suicide does. There was no note and she said nothing on the phone about killing herself."

He shook his head. "Sorry I can't help you, Sam. Believe me, I never had any sort of relationship with Rita Perkins. We were only invited to the party on Sunday because we're friends of the Halls." Clark and I walked back to our cars together and parted. I could see Jason Sennick watching from the barn, but happily he didn't approach me for any more advice.

It was late that afternoon when Sheriff Lens stopped by my office in the doctors' wing of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. The lab that did tests for the county was located there too, and he brought me the report on the water jar from Cana. "I had it tested every which way, just like you wanted, Doc. They even x-rayed it."

I could tell from his tone of voice that they'd found nothing, but I still took the report and looked it over: *One stoneware water jar, height 6 in., weight 14 oz., capacity 27 fluid oz. Word "Cana" scratched on bottom. X-ray and chemical analyses reveal no irregularities or foreign substances.* I handed it back to him. "Got any ideas?"

"Maybe we should consider suicide again."

"You're the second one who's suggested suicide. Bud Clark was telling me that just this morning."

"Look at it this way, Doc. There was no wine in the house. No

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one poisoned that jar before you all left, because you tasted it yourself and it was still water. The killer didn't return with the poisoned wine because there were no footprints in the snow that started falling as you and Mary left. Where does that leave us? Suicide, right?"

"Where'd she get the wine?"

"Maybe a little cooking wine somewhere. My men might have missed it."

"Why put it in that Cana jar when there was a perfectly good glass on the table right next to—?"

I stopped speaking and saw again in my mind that empty glass standing next to the poisoned jar at the center of the kitchen table. "My God, Sheriff, it just came to me! Come along. I'm going to show you how water changed into wine and who poisoned Rita Perkins."

Jason Sennick was working on his truck in the front yard of the Hall farmhouse when we drove up. He stared at me, as he had done earlier, and then went back to his task. It was Mildred who answered when we rang and showed us to the big living room. "Is your husband here, too?" I asked.

"He's in the study. What is this about?"

"I have a question to ask you, and I'm sure he'll want to hear the answer."

The color drained from her face. "I'll get him."

Proctor Hall came in smoking one of his long cigars, dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans. "Hello, Sam, Sheriff. Good to see you. What's this all about?"

"I just have a question for your wife, Proctor."

"What's that?"

"Mildred, how many stoneware jars did you buy in Cana?"

"How many?" She glanced at her husband.

Proctor answered the question. "You bought two, Mildred. Don't you remember? We kept the other one for ourselves."

"That's right," she said, moistening her lips.

"Could I see it?" I asked.

She went out and returned in a moment carrying a brown jar that seemed the exact duplicate of the one they'd given Rita. "Here it is. They're both the same."

I turned it over and saw the Cana marking scratched on the bottom. "How did you know there were two, Doc?" the sheriff asked.

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"Because the customs declaration gave the weight of the stoneware as twenty-eight ounces, while your lab report listed it as fourteen ounces. Obvious deduction: There were two jars."

"What does that tell us?"

"How Rita Perkins was poisoned in a locked house surrounded by unmarked snow."

"Look here," Proctor Hall spoke up, "if you're accusing my wife of anything, you'd better watch your step!"

"The autopsy shows Rita was three months pregnant," I went on. "The pregnancy began in August, Proctor, and I think you were the cause of it. When you returned from your cruise she threatened to name you as the father."

His expression had turned angry. "You don't have an ounce of evidence to back up any of this."

"I think I have. When I first saw Rita's body and entered her kitchen on Sunday, the jar and the empty glass were at the center of the table. You two arrived almost at once, and moments later, when I went to examine the contents of the jar, it was at the edge of the table. Only one of you could have moved it, could have substituted Rita's original jar for the second one you'd brought with you."

"The poisoned wine?" Mildred asked. "But she was already dead then! You're accusing us of bringing poisoned wine and substituting it for the water jar after she was dead?"

"Exactly," I told her. "But I'm only accusing one of you."

"Which one?" Sheriff Lens asked, shifting his gaze between them.

"When I let them into Rita's house they were both wearing topcoats as protection against the weather. Mildred took hers off and left it over a chair in the living room, but Proctor kept his on. She could hardly have hidden the substitute jar under the tight sweater and skirt she was wearing, so it had to be you, Proctor. A large cork or a piece of rubber, held in place with a rubber band, would have kept the wine from spilling while it was hidden under your coat. You switched jars while I turned away to phone the sheriff. That's why there were no fingerprints on it. You knew from Rita's phone call, of course, that she had swallowed the poison and was dying."

His smile was hard and cold. "You're accusing me of getting Rita pregnant and then bringing a jar of poisoned wine into her house

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after she was already dead. What purpose could I possibly have had for substituting those jars?"

"You had to introduce poison into the house in some manner, so the police wouldn't realize the true source of it. The water jar from Cana provided a perfect opportunity. It left us puzzling over a miracle while obscuring the truth."

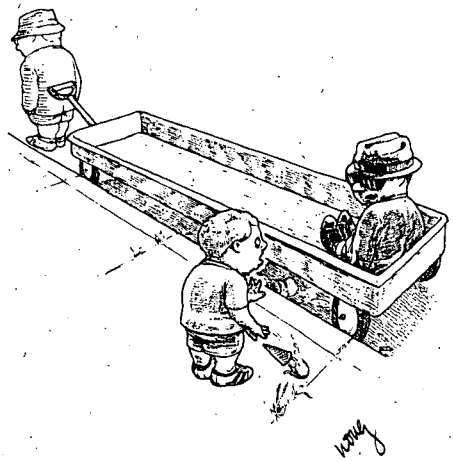
"What truth was that?" he asked.

"I think you slipped Rita a packet of poison when you took her aside to thank her for the party. Later, after everyone had gone, she went into the kitchen and mixed it with water in that glass. She drank it down and then washed out the glass before the first symptoms started. You gave her the poison and that's why she tried to phone you first when the convulsions began."

"Why would she take poison that I gave her?"

I took a deep breath. "Because you told her it would induce a miscarriage."

Proctor Hall was tried and convicted early the following year. A supply of cyanide salts and some letters from Rita were found hidden in a closet of his home, and Mildred testified that it had been his idea to keep secret the purchase of two water jars in Cana. She divorced him soon afterward and moved out of state. By that time the Germans were in Denmark, and the world was changing faster than anyone could have imagined. ●



"Get in."

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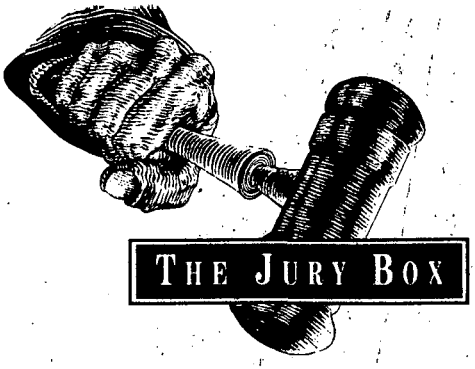

by Jon L. Breen

There is such a crowd of new and well-established living writers elbowing for space in the mystery lists that many worthy bylines of past years are out of print. While the risk of obscurity for deceased genre writers is nothing like as great as for so-called mainstream writers, it's sad to find so many unavailable to present-day readers. Used book stores and older public libraries are the best sources for the works of such writers, but library books wear out eventually and often must be discarded to make room for the flood of new books.

A friend urged me to read the works of Dolores Hitchens (1907-1973), a.k.a. D. B. Olsen, who published almost fifty novels between 1938 and the year of her death. After sampling her very unusual beachfront suspense novel *The Watcher* (1959), surely a pioneer in the use of Orange County, California, as a background, and her private-eye novel *Sleep With Slander* (1960), once called by Bill Pronzini "the best private eye novel written by a woman—and one of the best written by anybody," I decided she is indeed a neglected master. Her novels provide evidence in support of at least two points relevant to the present-day field: 1) American women writers were not an unappreciated and persecuted underclass before 1980, and 2) the under-200-page length of the standard mystery of twenty to forty years ago resulted in a much leaner and more effective product than many of the overlong books being published today. I hope some reprinter will bring the works of Hitchens to a new audience—ironically, in the forties and fifties, Hitchens wrote quite a few cozy mysteries with cats in them under her Olsen pseudonym. What could be a

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more likely choice for rediscovery in the present-day market?

**** Anne Perry: *Pentecost Alley,* Fawcett Columbine, $22.95. In the sixteenth entry of one of the most distinguished historical detective series, Victorian London police Superintendent Thomas Pitt confronts what may be another serial killer of prostitutes only two years after the notorious (and unsolved) Jack the Ripper murders. As usual, wife Charlotte and other family members join in the investigation, but the spotlight is on Pitt himself, who faces the horror of having possibly accused (and precipitated the execution of) the wrong suspect. One of the clues: The badge of the Hellfire Club, a small group of dissolute privileged youth disbanded six years before. This is Anne Perry at the top of her form.

*** Barbara Parker: *Blood Relations,* Dutton, $22.95. Dade County prosecutor Sam Hagen swims against the tide to prosecute three men, including a film star, accused of raping a 17-year-old model in a Miami Beach nightclub's VIP room. Reminders of the death a year before of his modeling son, a fresh encounter with a former girlfriend who has gone from model to fashion photographer, his deteriorating relationship with his grieving wife, and a series of murders serve to complicate Hagen's life further. This is a well-written and involving example of the pour-on-the-miseries modern crime novel. The surprise solution might have been more effectively prepared for with subtle fair-play clues rather than broad hints.

*** Robert Campbell: *The Lion's Share,* Mysterious, $21.95. Chicago politico Jimmy Flannery's 90-year-old mentor Delvin is found dead (not surprising) after an apparent liaison with a prostitute (very surprising). The experience of sorting through the furnishings and papers left in Delvin's house will strike a familiar note with many readers. Any number of writers have tried to recapture the elusive magic of Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe. By superficial evidence, Campbell is not one of them, but for me, the distinctive first-person style and the large gallery of continuing characters of the Flannery series create a similar brand of durable pleasure.

*** Bill Crider: *Winning Can Be Murder,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The eighth case for Texas sheriff Dan Rhodes centers on the supreme importance of winning high school football games in small-town America, even more important than the murder of an assistant coach. Crider is the kind of pro who makes it all look so effortless, it's easy to overlook

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how good he is. The one drawback to this low-key, humorous, and unpretentious pure whodunit is that Rhodes confronts the very cooperative murderer on a mighty slim hunch with no definitive clues for the reader to interpret.

** Gary Lovisi: *Extreme Measures,* Gryphon Press, P. O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $15. The fifteen stories in this trade-paperback collection, most reprinted from original anthologies or semipro periodicals, show author/publisher Lovisi to greater advantage than the novel reviewed here last month. Though varied in theme and subject matter, his stories are *very* grim and hardboiled specimens of the *darkest* dark suspense, "nasty stories, about nasty people doing nasty things," as Richard A. Lupoff's introduction warns. The two short-shorts that bookend the collection, "New Blood" and "Live and Learn" have a powerful kick to them. Of the longer tales in between, "Flashback" is a story where the over-the-top excess really works, while in "Demonology," with its anti-religious fervor, it decidedly does not.

For fans of Edward D. Hoch, *EQMM* has been headquarters over more than thirty years. First appearing in the December 1962 issue with "Death in the Harbor," Hoch gradually increased his output for the magazine and since May 1973 has had at least one story in every single issue. Still, many Hoch stories then and now have appeared other places—for example, "The Graveyard Ghoul," the latest tale of Hoch's first series detective Simon Ark, who debuted in the pulps in 1955, appears in the original anthology *Night Screams* (Roc, $5.99), edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg. The story is a typically well-clued formal detective story—as a bonus to the present-day puzzle, Ark considers a historical mystery about Ralph Waldo Emerson. For a key to Hoch's entire output, including full chronological listings of his 26 series through March 1996, you need to acquire the meticulous and exhaustive loose-leaf reference *Edward D. Hoch Bibliography: Fifth Edition, 1955-1995,* compiled by June M. Moffatt and Francis M. Nevins, Jr., with an introduction by Marvin Lachman. For details, write Moffatt House, Box 4456, Downey, CA 90241-1456. (Which Hoch sleuth has made the most appearances? As of this past March, Captain Leopold had a commanding lead with 95, followed by Jeffrey Rand and Nick Velvet with 72 each, Ark and Dr. Sam Hawthorne with 52 each.)

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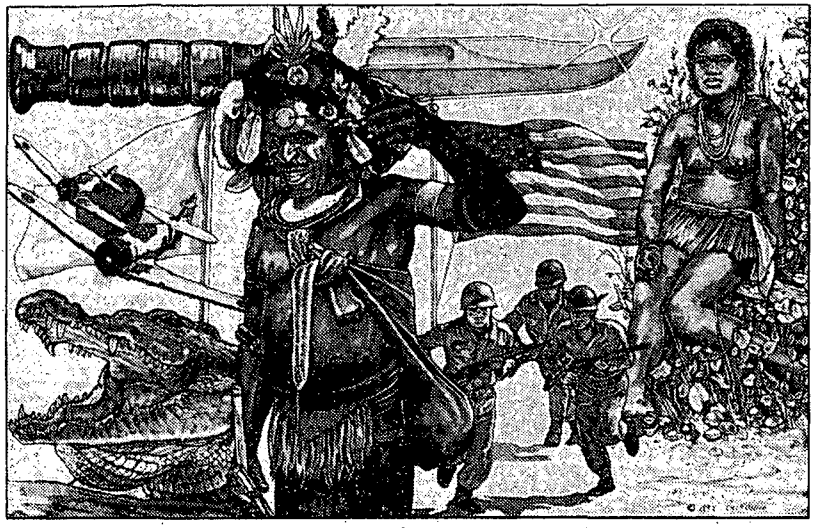

Art by Ron Chironna

LADY HILLARY

by Janwillem van de Wetering

Good day, Ma'am Tourist Group Leader from America. Welcome to the Tariand Isles of Niugini.

Your tourist group likes my little Pacific isle? I'm glad. I'm the chief here, just a little chief. My great-grandfather Waku was a great chief who became ruler, after much carefully planned and brilliantly executed interisland warfare, of all the Tariand Islands here in Pangea Bay on the east coast of Niugini. Niugini is our name for Papua New Guinea. PNG (we call it that too) is, next to the immensity of Greenland, this planet's biggest island. Even so, few people know our country, except experienced travelers, like yourself, ma'am, and your group.

I don't know America, but I did travel to Europe. After Independence, in 1975, we thought we should introduce ourselves to our former masters, the British, the Germans, the Dutch, the Portuguese. I was part of the retinue of our prime minister; we wore

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three-piece suits and headgear made out of casuari feathers. Everywhere we went we were mistaken for representatives of some newborn African nation. We kept saying, "Papua New Guinea, North of Australia," and a departmental secretary would say, ". . . Ah . . ." and buy us lunch maybe. Hamburgers. French fries. In Bonn we were fed sushi; that was nice, actually. We do care for fresh fish.

During the Second World War we were important, though, and even American warriors admitted that my grandfather, Witu of the Tariand Crocodile Clan of Niugini, was a great Papuan island chief. Lieutenant James Cosby of the U.S. Marines came back to present my grandfather with a Legion of Merit medal. We keep it in our Long House, it has its own shelf.

Reviews of Janwillem van de Wetering's fiction have repeatedly praised him as one of the most innovative of contemporary mystery writers. Now, for the first time, a volume of Mr. van de Wetering's stories, entitled *Mangrove Mama and Other Tales of Terror* (published by Dennis McMillan), is available in bookstores. The stories originally appeared in *EQMM*.

The medal came with this beautiful ribbon that I wear on my belt between these parrot feathers. Just one moment, I have to undo its clasp. Here you are, ma'am, you can pass the ribbon along to your fellow tourists. Chief Witu earned the great honor because he kept you Allieds informed about Japanese naval movements. My grandfather once tricked a Japanese destroyer (by observing and copying Japanese light signals) into breaking up on a reef. Chief Witu was also known for his cunning counsel.

My grandfather's wisdom once saved face for your Marine Corps. Shall I tell you what happened or would you rather take your group skin diving?

Your group's itinerary allows for an extra hour to spend on trivial matters? Good. We can all sit in the shade of the banyan tree there. See where the tree's air roots have formed a little cabin? That's where my throne is, I can look down on the people and direct their formal dancing. But there's no need for formality now. Some other time perhaps, maybe some of you would like to learn

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about our sacred dances, but for now . . . let me tell you. . . .

The Marine Corps face-saving matter was tricky, both personal and political. Lieutenant James Cosby, "Jim Bwana," as he liked us to call him, was accused of raping Leia, my beautiful sister, and cutting her throat afterward. Our murder suspect Jim Bwana was a splendid man, of course, not just a Marine warrior but a graduate of the, ahhh,—I can never say it right, *Havvard* (?) School as well. Do I pronounce that right? *Havvard,* yes? The American school of wizards? Good. Even so, in spite of his qualifications, Jim Bwana, liked and admired by all of us, nearly lost name and fame here but was saved by my father's father, chief Witu.

Isn't war fun?

I was only a boy then but never will I forget the glorious days when your war birds dueled with their Japanese counterparts in our sky, when our giant crocodiles slid into the lagoons looking for parachuted corpses, when dried chicken eggs and other exotic foods were served out of little green cans, when we tore gold braid off Japanese officer tunics and used it in our hairdos together with polished pieces we cut from spent cannon shells. Later the fun improved. There were Japanese landings, brief fights among the sharp eight-feet-high alun-alun grasses—we used our weapons.

I'm sorry, I'll try to be brief. I forget the other items in your program, skin diving, was it? I hope you won't be naked. We hear nakedness is rude in America and we can't abide rudeness. You won't be rude? That's nice. I am glad.

As I said, my mind wanders back sometimes, to throwing spears, or swinging them, like clubs.

We play golf now. Have you seen our course? Japanese tycoons fly their business jets out to Port Moresby on the mainland, then ferry across Pangea Bay in their hydrofoil. When they come ashore here I charge big money for entry and dues. Would any of you like to be a member? The memory of Jim Bwana will warrant a discount. Here is my card, for you, sir. We don't allow ladies on our course. You and your colleagues, when you plan to come out again, can fax me at my office so that I can confirm reservations. Winter months are quite busy.

We, male members of the Crocodile Clan, follow the warrior path. I'm glad to see white hair on your party's gentlemen's heads, it means the gents will remember the great war of the forties. Once in a while the sightseeing schooner out of Port Moresby

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brings us your anthropology students who need to fill up their laptop computers. I get paid by the tourist agency to answer their questions. I tell them our war stories. It's all news to them. Sometimes those bright young folks stare at me as if they don't know nothing.

Oh dear . . .

Wearing a pig's tusk through my nose doesn't excuse use of the double negative. If Sister Cissy could hear me she'd rap my knuckles with that *bad* wooden ruler. Sister Cissy was an Australian nun who taught school here, before Independence, of course. The young Papuan sister who met you at the dock is now in charge of the Mission.

Pardon?

Yes, ma'am, when our nation was considered old enough to make its own decisions we, on this island, retained the Roman Catholic faith. We didn't make religious changes, but appearances changed somewhat. We're in the tropics here. You will have noticed the heat. So our sisters go topless, as far as we are concerned we consider that quite polite.

I'm sure Sister Cissy forgives that change, but I'm equally sure my use of the double negative will infuriate her spirit. I apologize to her spirit. You see, ma'am, now that we're seeing modern movies we tend to pick up bad language, but as for me, I do make an effort to practice your Queen's English.

Does America have a queen? I get confused sometimes. I only traveled to Europe, you see. You do have one now, right? The Lady Hillary? No? I thought I read that somewhere. *Time* magazine? No? She was on the cover. A lovely lady.

America, to me, is kind of a dream. Like movies.

What was that, ma'am? You were saying that violence on TV has an unfortunate influence on us native people?

That may be so, but here in Niugini we don't have TV yet. So far the prime minister says we don't need more advertising. He sees TV in Australia in hotel rooms and he says it's repulsive. All dead babies and fast food. We do see movies, though. In the Long House over there, the very tall building with the sloping roofs, I keep a VCR and a large-size monitor that a Japanese group gave us. The old Caterpillar generator Sister Cissy left makes it go. My cousin the schooner captain brings out videotapes that he copies in Port Moresby. Kick-ass movies are great fun, ma'am. The language may be bad, but the action is simply splendid. We particularly like

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Chief Schwarzenegger, he who married Lady Hillary of the Kennedy tribe.

Oh, I see. Pardon our ignorance, ma'am. We don't get too many newspapers here. Clint? Clint Eastwood? Wrong again? Clint Ton? I see, *Clinton.* Just a president, you say? I'm glad you explained. I'll try to remember.

Shall I tell your group about the time your Marine Corps nearly lost face, about splendid Jim Bwana and my poor sister Leia?

Jim Bwana and his men were dropped off a U.S. Navy motor patrol boat when the Battle of the Coral Sea was going on. As you remember, a flotilla of Japanese invasion vessels, aimed at Australia, was defeated between Guadalcanal and these islands. It is impossible to forget the views we enjoyed then. The first great happening was Japanese warships sailing by in formation. I had never seen anything like it — those big light-gray-colored vessels with their smoothly swiveling guns, the bright flags used for communication, their sea planes being catapulted off their rear decks, scouting everywhere. Whenever the warships came by, theirs or yours, it didn't matter, I ran along our beaches, with the other boys behind me, screaming and waving. We had no idea what we were looking at, but we were so happy it drove us crazy. Like the Speechless One here, but she is always that way. . . .

Then you folks, in Mustangs, suddenly dove out of the sky and bombed us. You thought the Japanese had taken over our village and lands but what you saw were women tilling our fields (they still did that then; now they insist we take turns) and little girls manning bamboo lookout towers, keeping seed-eating birds away. The Mustang pilots must have been nervous, they kept strafing and bombing. Us males happened to have an important ceremony going on, me and some other boys were being prepared for coming of age. Dressed in my creamy white parrot-feather skirt and bright red-clay ghost mask, I was stomping about the village square, and suddenly air devils dove down and the village was burning. Wasn't that an intimidating initiation? I thought I had done something wrong at first. Fortunately you missed our two community temples. Both the Long House and the Boys House are considered as kind of holy. There are treasures inside. Used to elevate our spirits. You didn't miss my father and brother. They both got hit. My brother Masset died instantly, my father took his time, having many helpful hallucinations before he floated off on the turtle shell.

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Yes, ma'am, quite a few women and girls were hit too.

Then the Japanese sent a boat ashore, to see why you bombed us.

No, ma'am, Sister Cissy had left us already. She died before the war and the other Australian nuns had fled to their convent in Brisbane. They had been teaching us knitting and Jesus and how to wash hands and relieve ourselves before dinner and be respectful to our masters. I forget how to knit, but we still love Jesus. The Japanese had Buddha. He lives in a little mahogany box, with hinged doors that open; you get to burn incense and clap your hands and sing. I like Buddha too. We keep him in the Long House, in the box that we captured from the Japanese captain. Our holy sisters keep a little Jesus in their church, but we have our own big Jesus in the Long House. My brother Masset carved him long ago, from specially selected pieces of driftwood that he dovetailed together. The big statue is still in service, in spite of the squirrel living in Jesus' stomach. The squirrel has long whiskers, he takes part in some of the ceremonies, running about and squeaking. We also have Elvis Presley, he is a painting done by the Speechless One here. We started with a poster that a sea captain gave us, but the paper wore out. The Speechless One loves him.

Yes, ma'am? How did Sister Cissy die? Unnecessarily, I'm afraid. There is a hill behind the village that we can climb after we have purified ourselves. It's just for sitting, gazing, quietness, that sort of thing. Sister Cissy wanted to grow tomatoes on that hill's slope. We warned her, but she was somewhat strong-minded and started pulling up weeds, tearing the soil, and one of the hill's devil-lizards bit her bottom. Those devil-lizards are quick. They're big too, ten feet long, including the tail of course. They like to eat our goats, but they eat us too if we make ourselves defenseless by not paying attention. Sister Cissy got bitten badly. Afterward she hit the lizard with her rake and he backed off and hid in the bushes. This happened over fifty years ago, before we had penicillin here.

Let me sing you the story while the Speechless One plays her bones. All set?

Go!

Devil-lizard doesn't mind being chased off, he can think. He waits behind bushes for Sister Cissy to weaken. My grandfather, chief Witu, can think too. Devil-lizard concentrates on Sister Cissy

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and grandfather concentrates on Devil-lizard, and gets him. We roast Devil-lizard, have a death feast for the sister. Devil-lizard enters by the mouth, Sister Cissy enters by the ear. (Bone music. Bone music.)

Don't let the sacred Speechless One frighten you. She carries the craziness of this island, but we keep her in check. We always have one, you see. Craziness is so useful.

No, the Speechless One is not always female. In fact, I think there is a mistake here, but somehow this generation's Speechless One entered a woman. Could it be the greenhouse effect? Or nuclear carelessness somewhere? Worrying, somehow. Very.

Okay, Speechless One, that's enough now. Sit down. Yes, you have lovely legs. Fold them. That's better. Thank you. Please relax, dear.

Where was I? Sister Cissy's bottom? We used herbs on Sister Cissy's wound but couldn't stop the lizard bite's infection. A high fever set in that resulted in death. We buried the body for a while, within view of the Long House, within earshot too. We did a lot of drumming and chanting and so forth, to prepare Sister Cissy's bones.

Yes, sir. It does get a tad chilly here in the evenings, could be the sea breeze. Makes you shiver, doesn't it? I have the same trouble.

Any other questions?

What the Japanese were like?

A little fishy, ma'am, reminded me of that seagull I ate when my canoe broke on a reef during a storm, and I had to wait for my father to find me. We are what we eat. That makes seagulls flying fish. Japanese are walking fish. Australian soldiers, we met quite a few of those too, with those hats that curl up on one side; Australians are sort of muttony and Americans kind of beefy.

Ha ha.

Sorry, ma'am. Just kidding—I beg your pardon. We're not cannibals on the Tariand Isles. We do have some customs, of course—what tribe hasn't? — but for really consuming human flesh I'd have to refer you to the mainland. Foreign rule stopped flesh eating for some time, as you know. We were colonized for, oh, over a hundred years, I should think. There were the Dutch out west side, the Germans up north side, the British/Australians down here, south and east, and roving Portuguese in the past. Your white tribes' customs differ a little but all you folks agreed that we

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shouldn't catch and eat each other. "Headhunting," as you called our pastime, took up too much time. Instead you had us pick coconuts to make margarine or kill off birds of paradise to stick feathers in your girlfriends' hats. All work, no fun for us, all fun, no work for you. Tribal warfare is our fun, though, and now that we're on our own again it's drifting back on the mainland.

Ancient customs, something to keep us busy.

How about us island people? Well, everything changes so fast—I'm not too sure. I have no way of knowing for certain, but maybe some of our young men still practice a little customs. The young men are very much on their own, you see. We allow our boys some privacy, to grow up in. Adults live rather dull lives, they'll have enough of that later. Eventually they'll be like I am now, like to play a little golf. Some fishing in the afternoon. A nap. Watch Chief Arnold in the Long House. Chief Schwarzenegger, on the big monitor, with the VCR the Japanese gave us—that's right, ma'am.

What kind of customs do our young ones practice?

Our young fellows, from fourteen through seventeen, not an easy age as you may recall, live in the Boys House over there. With the skulls on the veranda. They're plastic, you know. I bought them in London, they came in flat cartons, all broken up in parts, we had to glue the parts together. I had sticky fingers for a week. They do look real, don't they now?

Well, yes, we do train our boys a little, but apart from weekly instruction we pay no attention to what our successors are doing. For instruction the boys join us in our Long House. There's ritual, there's storytelling by the chief—our sorcerer, Mr. Waya, is in charge of ritual. We beat wooden drums and shake lizard-skin tambourines (baby rat skulls are the jingles), and the Speechless One rattles Sister Cissy's thighbones. The Long House is dark but the shadows are dancing. Hollow-eyed images of the ancestors look down from the rafters. There is always a draft in the Long House, even if there is no wind outside. It rustles the ancestors' grass skirts and Leia's coral necklace. Mr. Waya's herbal student burns twigs, roots, and leaves. The wooden Jesus statue, pale white, lifts its arms while Buddha smiles quietly in his box. The foreign chiefs smile too, especially Chief Elvis when we do his "You're Nothing but a Hound Dog." You know the hymn? Big Bart's Marine fighting knife squeaks in its sheath. We don't have Sergeant Big Bart's bones here but the Speechless One made a

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mask that catches his likeness. Now that you mention it, I haven't seen that mask lately. I hope she didn't take it out of its niche.

Well, never mind.

So our big boys are humming, the younger ones, with the clear high voices, chant "Heartbreak Hotel." We also have our own hymns. After an hour of good chanting and burning there's that strong acrid smell that shows things are beginning to jump a little.

Ha!

Excuse me. I get too enthusiastic.

No, ma'am, girls are not allowed either in the Long House or in the Boys House.

After instruction in the Long House our young men go back to their Boys House.

What do they do there? Play cards, I think. Smoke Benson & Hedges, I imagine, that's a brand of cigarettes that is advertised on billboards here: The pictures show handsome warriors in ceremonial dress impressing attentive, beautiful girls that look like my dead sister Leia. Everybody smokes. Or the boys drink Budweiser maybe. The schooner brings beer once a week, taking wood sculptures in return. We like to chisel palmwood on this island. Our specialty. Here's an example of our art. See? Big penis on one side, gun butt on the other. The butt side of the art object curves. The Portuguese raiders, a hundred years ago, were armed with that kind of handgun. Portuguese "blackbirders" didn't do too well here, though. We caught some, but most of them died by natural causes. Or so I heard.

Yes. That's true, ma'am. I did live in the Boys House myself and do recall that in my time . . . of course . . . I don't know if such a pastime would still be popular now. Each of our Tariand islands had a custom then, when I was a boy—but, as I said, that's a long time ago now—of "hunting *Her.*"

"Hunting *Her*" involved sending scouts to the neighboring islands to look for *Her,* for that island's female principle. My sister Leia, on this island, was a candidate to be the female principle, we knew that, but the custom said that we could only use a *Her* from another island. It meant that we had to protect Leia, for boys from another island would be likely to be attracted.

So, when I was a boy living in our Boys House . . .

What the new building is on the other side of the village? Ah, you noticed, did you? Oh, some newfangled idea we haven't quite

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dealt with. We may have to pull that building down soon, but please don't interrupt, ma'am. I'm trying to tell this story.

So once our scouts determined what girl *Her* inhabited in one of the other islands, we would carefully note that girl's habits, her timetable, and so forth, when and where she might be alone. Then . . . you really want to hear the story, ma'am? You're sure? Not too rough for your group? I notice it's mostly female. Okay, I continue.

There might be some sick boys who would stay behind in our home island's Boys House to light and tend fires, burn twigs, make the acrid smoke I mentioned. Us others would sneak out in a war canoe shaped like a two-headed crocodile. You saw the canoe boats in our harbor? Tourist display now, but they were all in use once. We kept our paddles razor sharp so that they can also serve as weapons. Us boys, naked, rubbed with oils, honed by all sorts of war games that we used to play all the time, were weapons ourselves. We would have waited for a moonless, windless night. Once on the chosen island (we have six islands here) we would hide in the jungle that surrounds the village, wait for daybreak, for *Her* to show herself, catch the girl, sling her body from a pole, race back to the canoe, wait for nightfall, paddle home.

And then?

Hmmm. I don't know whether your anthropologists ever got that part of our customs right. Eating human flesh is not for sustenance, you know. We keep pigs for that. The "hunting *Her*" custom intends to join spirits, there is no room for the stomach. If boys partake of *Her* it's to harmonize their manhood.

Oh yes, I'm afraid, in those long-bygone days, we did eat *Her*. There were other sacred customs too, that came first.

Pardon? You say "rape"?

How could we? Poor girl? Perhaps. But think of the honor, though, how the chosen one knew that she did represent the highest, the most elevated part of half of what goes on. How she was the essence of what all men are looking for? Forever?

Think of the custom's aftermath too. To us participating boys, the adventure was fraught with danger. If we were caught, we died. There was always revenge when the boys from the other island would notice that their divine one was missing and send their scouts to even things out. If they found us they'd have to kill us. Of course they'd also come to find *Her* on this island. Keep us on our toes, so to speak.

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Disgusting, you say?

Remember First Lieutenant James Cosby, "Jim Bwana"?

What was he suspected of doing? How come Leia got raped, then murdered?

Guilty?

Perhaps you'd like to drink some coconut juice first? We serve Heineken too. A Perrier for the ladies?

You are refreshed?

Good.

Leia and I had different mothers. Leia's mother was a *Her* who never got caught. We knew Leia was *Her* too and made an effort to guard her.

You saw our girls when you walked up the ramp from the schooner this morning? Arranged into two rows, facing each other, leaving just enough space so that our visitors can shuffle through? Wearing grass-minis? Perfumed with squirrel secretion? Chanting and bopping while the Speechless One taps her bones to carry the chant? The girls brushing the gentlemen in your party with their breasts? Our new local nuns clapping and smiling?

Leia was many times as attractive.

The American Marines liked to look at Leia but she had eyes for Jim Bwana only. The lieutenant and his men came to set up radio equipment and to train us as spotters, but when the Japanese landed patrols too the Marines stayed on. In order not to attract attention, the Marines killed with their knives.

Later, when the Japanese had left the area and the Marines had little to do, Jim Bwana had a long jetty built into the ocean. The Marines constructed a little thatch-covered hut at the end of the jetty. Jim Bwana liked to sit there quietly for hours on end. I think he was thinking of Leia. He probably knew she was *Her*. Leia kept showing herself to the lieutenant, finding things to do in the yard when he came back from his jetty, smiling, reaching up to pick flowers or fruits.

Even good men are bad sometimes. You have noticed? There was a good/bad man in Lieutenant Jim's war group. His name was Sergeant Big Bart. The sergeant was driven crazy by Leia's smiles and movements, directed at Jim Bwana, who seemed not to notice. Not expecting a raid from a neighboring island—the Great War was still on — us boys weren't paying attention. Big Bart broke into my sister's cabin one night and raped her. That same night Jim Bwana, made bold by my sister's seductive invitations,

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finally gathered courage and knocked on Leia's door. Inside Leia was about to scream for help. Big Bart, hearing the lieutenant's voice, cut Leia's throat. Big Bart escaped through the window. The lieutenant, perturbed by Leia's throaty death-gurgle, entered the cabin. He tried to help Leia, had her leaning against his chest. There was blood all over his tunic. Big Bart had left his knife. The lieutenant wasn't armed. Seeing Leia was dead, the lieutenant panicked. He left, leaving footprints.

We found Leia's corpse in the morning, the blood, the knife, the footprints that enabled us to track the lieutenant, who was waiting for us in his thatched hut at the end of the jetty.

We liked Jim Bwana fine, and we understood what he had been doing, but custom demanded the intruder's death.

We were all very sorry, but our brothers, the huge lagoon crocodiles, were hungry now. We would have to feed them.

The lieutenant told my grandfather, Chief Witu, that he was innocent, but the evidence (although we didn't understand why he hadn't tried to eat her) was overwhelming. Even the Marines didn't believe their own chief. Chief Witu kept quiet. He just nodded, had the lieutenant locked up in the bamboo cage behind the Long House, and appointed me as a guard. That night I heard my grandfather ask Jim Bwana if his Havvard (I wish I could say it right) training suggested a solution. Jim Bwana said it did not. He had no idea who was the real killer. When he entered Leia's house there was just blood, and the corpse.

Sergeant Big Bart had gone off to check radio equipment on a hill on the other side of our island.

While all this happened word came from the mainland that the Great War was coming to an end, and we knew our friends, the Marines, were waiting to be picked up by a warship.

There were some twenty victorious white Marines and some five thousand of us black, friendly, armed, and war-trained *Fuzzyheads,* that's what we were called then. It was a term of endearment. We had been of use. There were a few million of us in the islands and on the mainland. It was rude to repay us for our wartime help with what a Marine lieutenant had done to Leia, daughter of a chief.

As I said before, the matter was tricky.

The Speechless One of that time played Sister Cissy's thighbones and Mr. Waya, after consulting a cracked tortoise shell in the Long House while my father made the acrid smell, set a date

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and time for pronouncing a verdict. My grandfather's decision could be predicted. Weren't the facts clear? My sister's dead body on the straw mat? The Marine fighting knife on the floor? A man's seed in her shell? Lieutenant Jim's bloody trail leading out of the house toward the jetty, ending in the thatched hut at the end where we found him crying?

So what to do?

My father said that, as the tortoise shell indicated that his final decision had to be reached late that night, it might be nice to have a knife-throwing match first. All available Marines and quite a few of our warriors entered the contest. The target was a female figure cut from a lizard's skin that was strapped between bamboo poles. Just as the first contestant was about to throw his knife, a heavy rain poured down, as it always did at that time during that part of the rainy season. My father ordered that all knives had to be put on a table while we waited for the downpour to stop. While Mr. Waya beat a drum and the Speechless One danced, I replaced one of the Marines' knives with the one that had killed Leia.

The rain stopped, everybody went to the table to pick up his knife. One Marine said his weapon was missing. I pointed at the sharp flat dagger that was left on the table.

"Not mine."

"Whose?" my grandfather asked.

All the Americans studied the knife. Although Marine knives are standard issue and apparently look alike, they don't stay that way. After a while each Marine knows his own weapon, and those of his friends, by individual dents, stubborn rust spots, blemishes on the handle, or just the feel of the weapon.

Several Marines declared the murderous knife to belong to Sergeant Big Bart. As they were prepared to swear to the truth of their statements, Jim Bwana was released at once.

Beg pardon, ma'am?

Ah, you want to know what happened to Big Bart, the sergeant? He wasn't there. Feeling guilty, Big Bart was wandering all over our island, on all sorts of errands—catching Japanese stragglers, looking for downed pilots, that sort of thing.

Well, we first had a feast. We were ready, of course. Prize pigs were slaughtered, big grouper fish were lanced with skewers to be rotated above coals, a multivegetable stew simmered, crackly tree bugs were being roasted, the girls were lining up for their dance. Us boys were shaking the rain sticks. Leia's image moved in the

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breeze. We drank captured sake. Big Bart came back in the middle of the party, felt something was wrong, and took off again.

No, ma'am, a lizard got the sergeant. Us boys found Big Bart on the same hill slope as Sister Cissy. Wound fever had almost killed him then. Sergeant Big Bart died as we carried him in. The Marines had left, we sent the metal tag we took off Big Bart's neck to the mainland, by schooner.

The body?

Crocodiles ate the body, ma'am. We are of the Crocodile Clan, as I said.

You have to go now?

Thank you, ma'am. We appreciate presents, but on this island we sometimes do things the other way round. Today we don't accept presents. Here is a cassette for each of you. Mr. Waya composed the music. Here, I'll play one for you on this boombox.

You liked the music?

You heard the thighbones?

Excuse me, ma'am?

The crying in between the Speechless One's percussion? No, that isn't Big Bart, that's just the sound of large bats with flat faces that fly between the palm tops, looking for coconuts. I tried to chase them away when we were making the recording but the Speechless One was unhappy. Yes, the big bats do sound rather guilty. Like little male ghost voices, you say? Sorry for catching all those girls? Well, we only caught one girl once every three years or so. It's a custom, you see, with a very deep meaning. Religious, you might say.

So . . . have a safe journey home and please give my regards to Lady Hillary, do tell her to be careful.

Yes, aren't our girls noisy? The Girls House is having a ceremony again. Preparing for something or other? Yes, it does rather seem so. Why they keep chanting "Abau, Abau"? I don't really know. "Abau" is our word for "male principle." What those war canoes are doing in the cove near their building? Our nuns have been encouraging the girls to learn how to paddle.

Times are changing?

Who that handsome boy is? He is my son Kokoda, isn't he an exceptional fellow? A perfect male. A little fearful maybe.

What is troubling you, Kokoda? The idea that the girls on the other islands, in their newfangled Girls Houses, are chanting "Abau" too? ●

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Artist's Proof

by William Link

Together with his cowriter Richard Levinson, William Link exerted a profound influence over the development of the TV mystery. To mention but a few of their achievements, the pair invented TV's Lt. Columbo, wrote episodes for *The Fugitive* and *Mannix*, and were responsible for bringing the Ellery Queen series back to TV. After a long absence as a solo short story writer, Mr. Link returns with a twisty whodunit.

It was one of those barely subsistent shops that specialized in custom framing by day and occasionally exhibited the work of new artists at night. When Dwight Schreiber arrived there was a small crowd studying the paintings on the wall, mostly chatting away among themselves and partaking of cheap California white wine in plastic cups and tired Thai appetizers from a makeshift bar.

Dwight took a cup of Pellegrino and wandered along the line of pictures, appraising the art, but really looking for Scotty. The art was blatantly derivative, a shotgun wedding of Milton Avery and Alex Katz, and Scotty obviously was being her fashionably-late self. Her husband (whom Dwight had never met) was engaged in an intense colloquy with an older gentleman, and it was only proper that he was there because he was responsible for this wasteland of paint and canvas. Ken Rellis was a weak-chinned young man wearing the obligatory beard and Ralph Lauren workshirt with carefully aged designer jeans. Scotty liked money and Ken liked Scotty—the perfect equation, which left Dwight, a struggling film teacher, out in the cold. But not quite.

Dwight was pretending to study a New York cityscape when Scotty breezed in. She was just this side of breathtaking with her electric blue eyes, bright blond hair, drop-dead figure. Tonight she

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was wearing a simple (artist's wife) dress and high-laced granny shoes. Her shrewd eyes panned the room, recording an impassive Dwight with the high-speed acuity of a Nikon shutter. She began the circulating ritual, exchanging hellos with friends and giving the painter a peck on the cheek.

Dwight made his way back to the bar for a refill, knowing that Scotty would eventually go there herself for a glass of wine.

"Fancy meeting you," her voice purred in his ear. She was facing the barman, not looking at Dwight; she had the gift of speaking ventriloquially, her lips only slightly parted.

"Can I see you later?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

She made the barman add sparkling water to her wine. "We're invited to this collector's house after the showing." She was speaking normally now.

"Then why the hell did you ask me to come tonight?"

Her smile required sunglasses. "I thought you'd like to see his paintings."

He waited until the barman turned to wait on someone else. "He doesn't have to *imitate* Milton Avery—he could *buy* one."

The smile's wattage grew. "Call me tomorrow morning—he'll be out."

He watched her cross the room, the cynosure of male eyes, the crowd parting automatically, deferentially, as she joined her husband. It was as if, Dwight thought, she had leached all the glowing color from his paintings. Dwight finished his drink and left.

He called Scotty in the morning but got her message machine. He left the name "Milton Avery," an edge to his voice that let her know he was still angry.

His afternoon lecture on film noir was well attended and he was pleased with some of the perceptive feminist questions on why the male screenwriters made all the women characters vessels of betrayal.

When Dwight returned to his office in the faculty building he was surprised to find two strange men waiting for him.

One of them looked like a heavy from the world of the noirs, with scar tissue like an ex-boxer around his eyes and a dull hung-over expression. His partner was younger and good-looking; he

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had the petulant face of a male model. He was smoking an unfiltered Camel.

"You can't smoke in here," Dwight said curtly, and the man scowlingly ground out the cigarette on the bare floor.

The two men proffered IDs establishing themselves as homicide cops from a precinct a few blocks from the university. The older one with the scar tissue, Lieutenant Horgan, said, "We've been showing a composite drawing around campus and two people thought it was you."

"What composite?"

Horgan gave him the drawing. Dwight held it under the weak sunlight from the cracked skylight, frowning. It did look like him except the brows were too bushy and the subject wasn't wearing glasses.

"You're wearing glasses," the younger one, Miller, observed. "You always wear them?"

"Except when I sleep." He italicized the words with a slight shade of sarcasm. "I'm nearsighted with a touch of astigmatism."

"You'd agree there's a resemblance?" Horgan asked. He had a faint smile, as if suddenly the three of them were conspirators.

"Somewhat." He handed the picture back to Horgan. "Who is this guy?"

"You might've read about him in the paper," Miller said; they took turns talking, like a comedy team. "West Side rapist. So far he's raped and killed four women."

"Yes. I saw something about it on TV. But—how do you know what he looks like?"

Horgan said, "His last victim gave our artist a description before she died in the hospital."

How convenient, Dwight thought. He watched Miller mentally cataloguing the various objects in the office: books on film in the old bookcase, the sun-faded *8 1/2* and *Lawrence of Arabia* posters covering cracks in the plaster walls. But the room was basically pristinely impersonal, no family pictures in imitation-leather frames or nostalgic mementos. "Are you married, Mr. Schreiber?"

"No." Miller waited, but Dwight was damned if he was going to volunteer anything more than the civilian equivalent of name, rank, and serial number.

"Where were you last Tuesday night, the twenty-fourth?" Horgan asked.

"Home. In my apartment. Grading term papers."

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"Anybody with you?"

"No. If it's an alibi you're looking for, I don't have one. Sorry." Against his better judgment he continued, "What do you have on me besides this composite—which could look like a hundred other men as well?"

Horgan gave a noncommittal shrug. "Would you mind writing down your home address and phone number?"

"And how the hell did you narrow it down to just this campus?"

Miller seemed almost embarrassed. "After we put the drawing in the papers we got a number of tips. One of them said a guy fitting the description was seen all the time around here."

"And who gave you the tip?"

"Anonymous." He was looking wistfully at the cigarette on the floor.

"Go ahead and smoke, for God's sake," Dwight said. "I hate to see a grown man in pain. I doubt if the campus gendarmes are going to fine you for breaking the law."

Miller smiled, relieved, looking like a kid, lighting up and sucking in a gratifying lungful of smoke.

"Would you mind looking at some pictures?" Horgan asked, a model of deference. When Dwight failed to answer he removed an envelope from his pocket and passed a small packet of photos to the teacher.

Dwight thumbed through them (there were only four), experiencing a tug of déjà vu: They had the same weight and texture as the baseball cards he'd traded as a child. They were morgue shots, young women's faces, none over thirty, one reasonably attractive, the others pudgy and pockmarked, androgynous.

"Recognize any of them?" Miller asked casually. Through the blue wreaths of cigarette smoke his eyes seemed to elongate with scrutiny as he studied Dwight studying the cards.

"No. This one here looks vaguely like a girl who used to work at a Ticketron on Broadway. Did she?"

"Not that we know of. She was a hooker on Tenth Avenue." He exchanged a glance with Miller and both men seemed simultaneously to lose interest.

"Should I get a lawyer?" Dwight asked. He tried to add a note of flippancy but it didn't come out that way.

Miller smiled. "Not at the moment." He ground out the half-smoked cigarette. "Thanks for your help."

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Scotty came down from the second floor of a nail salon on Madison and found that she had a companion who guided her into a coffee shop next door. The place was somnolent, with a midafternoon sprinkling of patrons, so Dwight considered it a good place not to be overheard.

Scotty ordered a café au lait before she said, "Fancy meeting you here. How'd you know where to find me?"

"You're a creature of habit, Scottina. You wouldn't miss that nail appointment like a Catholic wouldn't miss Mass."

"I'm a Catholic and I miss Mass all the time."

Dwight winced and took her hand, idly twisting the diamond wedding band on her finger. "Don't be so goddamn literal. You're missing the point."

"Didn't Shaw say that was the history of the rapier—points are made to be missed?"

"Evaded. He said evaded. But I'm impressed with your erudition, Scottina."

"You only call me Scottina when you're pissed. Are you still in a snit because I couldn't see you last night?"

"No. Something else." He told her about the two detectives who came to his office. He expected her to be outraged, viewing it as something out of the theater of the absurd, but she merely stirred her café au lait thoughtfully.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he said. "These two jokers come on like something out of Raymond Chandler, treating me like I'm Gary Gilmore, and they don't have a shred of proof. Wouldn't *you* be pissed?"

"Well, that's the standard operating procedure for cops, isn't it?" she said with a maddening degree of equanimity. "What about that artist's composite?"

"That was the screwy part—it looked like my brother, if I had a brother. And somebody called them, gave them a tip where to find me. Does that sound like a setup or doesn't it?"

Scotty was silent for a long moment, studying her newly tended nails, the perfect sheen. He wanted to throttle her.

"Dwight," she said finally, "you never asked me what my husband's been doing these days."

"Well . . . no. I took it for granted he's doing what he always does—inherit."

"Yes. But Daddy-O's started to pitch a bitch. Thinks it's undignified for his son to tool around all day in his Ferrari and spend

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most of his time in the Sports Bar watching football or hockey or whatever he does."

"But he paints. Hasn't Daddy-O seen his son's latest excursion into excreta?"

"But that's not a nine-to-fiver."

"Daddy-O sounds very retro."

"Daddy-O is a mastodon. He eats, chews, spits fire, but he also signs checks."

Dwight had no idea where this was leading. "So Daddy-O forced Kenneth the Younger into getting a day job."

Scotty nodded somberly, ending the persiflage. "For your information, Dwight dear, Kenneth is a police artist."

This time they came to his apartment. It was after dinner, interrupting him watching a videotape he had rented of Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game.*

The young guy, Miller, wearing what looked like a knockoff Armani, wandered about, again taking an inventory of the apartment and its meager accoutrements. It would appear cops earned more than teachers.

"What is it this time, Horgan?" Dwight asked, turning off the VCR, letting them hear loud and clear the exasperation in his voice.

Horgan played the embarrassment card. "We were in the neighborhood and we thought—"

"You thought you'd drop by and harass me. Anything new or is it that composite again?"

The little packet of rape-murder victims came out. Horgan thumbed through them like an amateur magician beginning a boring "pick-a-card" routine. He held one out to Dwight. "Ring a bell?"

It was the only pretty one in the bunch, even though the features were battered and bloody. Short pageboy blond hair, a once vivacious cheerleader face. "I told you before, Horgan, I don't recognize any of these women."

"So you said." Miller strolled over to where they were sitting in the dead blue glare of the television set. "But this young woman—JoAnne Farlow by name—was in your cinema class last semester." He made the word "cinema" sound disreputable, even pornographic.

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"There were over a hundred students in my lecture classes last year," Dwight responded. "I'm afraid they were just a sea of faces."

"Uh-huh. And you don't remember the name?" Horgan asked.

"No. I don't remember the name. Was this another tip from your 'anonymous friend'?"

"No."

Dwight turned off the television. "May I ask you gentlemen a question?"

"Depends on what it is," Miller said. He had one of his unfiltered Camels going.

"This whole thing started with that artist's sketch—am I right?"

"Yeah," Horgan said. "The dying woman gave our man the description."

"And who was 'your man'?"

"Just somebody we employ to sketch pictures," Miller said. "Actually, I think he's pretty good."

"Who was with him when the woman gave him the description?"

Horgan looked at his partner: What the hell was he getting at? "I don't remember."

"Neither of you?"

Miller's frown marred his almost perfect symmetrical features. "No. Where is this going, Mr. Schreiber?"

"So if no one was there with him he could have drawn whatever he damned pleased. Since the woman subsequently died, she couldn't refute the drawing."

Horgan seemed to take a personal offense. "We don't operate like that."

"No, of course not." In all fairness, he had to admit, Ken would have been crazy confessing to his colleagues that he had a secret agenda.

"Any more questions?" Horgan asked with asperity.

"Ah—you've broken the rhythm," Dwight said.

"What rhythm? What the hell are you talking about?"

"It was Miller's turn to speak and you butted in."

Miller himself was looking around with growing desperation for an ashtray.

"Sorry," Dwight said, "nobody smokes around here."

"Don't you provide an ashtray for guests?"

"I'm not sure I'd place either one of you in that category."

Horgan's lower jaw jutted forward like a bulldog denied its dinner. Dwight realized he had crossed the line, gratuitously insulted

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them, but he didn't particularly give a damn. He wanted them to clear out with all their investigative irrelevancies.

Horgan, tight-lipped now, nodded at Miller and they both went to the door. Dwight used the remote to turn the television and the movie back on.

"Don't take any sabbaticals," Horgan warned. "We'll be back."

The Sports Bar was in the East Seventies, an upscale streamlined chrome and plastic palace, featuring a giant projection TV over the bar, and filled, like most of its ilk, with an uneasy twilight.

Dwight sat in a booth with a diet Coke, bored to tears, and was ready to call it a day when Ken walked in. He wore leisure clothes and he appeared jaunty, pumped up, full of life's wonder. Dwight caught his attention, waved him over.

"Don't I know you?" Ken said, feigning puzzlement but friendly, sliding into the booth.

"I should think so," Dwight said. "Seeing as how you drew my portrait."

They evaluated each other, Ken with a fixed smile and neutral eyes. He had big workout biceps straining his short-sleeved sport shirt, heavily corded with muscle, incongruously jock for a playboy painter. "Weren't you at my opening?" he asked, ignoring Dwight's statement and still maintaining the illusion of friendliness.

"Stow the bullshit, okay?" Dwight said. "You interviewed that victim in the hospital and she told you what she remembered physically about the West Side killer. But you drew a picture of me which you presented to your cop buddies as legitimate. That's a felony."

"Prove it." Ken smiled. The barman, programmed, brought him a scotch and water chaser. Ken hadn't once looked up at the giant ribbon of screen where squads of gladiators fumbled for the ball in an ocean of rain-lashed mud.

"And we both know why you did it," Dwight continued after the barman left. "It's payback time, isn't it, Ken?"

Now Ken lifted his head and concentrated on the knot of players on the big blurry color screen. "You mean because I resent you screwing my wife," he said offhandedly.

"Yes. I think that's exactly why you did it. It was the perfect plan: get the police hounding me and pretty soon the dean of my college will get wind of it and I'll be pounding the pavements looking for a new position."

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Ken was still smiling, eyes fixed on the game, but the smile now was merely a mask, a construct of rigid muscles. "The only position you should be worrying about is the one you use on my wife. I'll give you some advice, Professor—"

"I'm not a professor."

"Scotty told me all about her relationship with you. She said you wanted her to leave me and marry you." He laughed. "I'm afraid you don't know her. Scotty *loves* money, Professor—the color of it, the feel of it, the smell of it. What are you good for—forty, fifty K a year?"

"Don't forget your money's your father's."

Ken laughed again. "Best kind of money laundering—father to son. Listen, Professor—my wife needs a boy toy now and then. You're just one float in a long parade."

Now it was Dwight's turn to smile—and he did, a reasonable facsimile. "If I'm so expendable, Picasso, why were you so frightened you had to fake that composite and try to pin those serial murders on me?"

Ken took his eyes from the game, which was still forming its muddy configurations above their heads. "You really want to know? Because you're a cut above her other mindless hunks. You should know better than to crap on another man's marriage. I hate smug, pseudo-intellectual losers who sit in their ivory towers and look down on the rest of us."

The gloves were off and Dwight could feel the delicious cleansing rush of adrenalin. "Not the rest of us—just you, Picasso. It's quite hard not to look down on a pygmy. You've got the artistic talents of a chimpanzee with Down's Syndrome. You're not only a despicable painter, you're a despicable human being. And your wife wouldn't need a parade of hunks if you were man enough to service her in your own bedroom."

Dwight swung out of the booth, energized by the pure ozone of his anger. His last shot had been particularly telling: Ken was staring morosely down at his drink, fingers tightly interlaced around the glass, the knuckles white.

"You've done your damage," Dwight said. "But you've got no more arrows in your bow. So you'd better get used to me and Scotty. After you're long gone, I'll still be with her."

But he spoke too soon. Scotty refused to see him, and when he

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finally confronted her on the phone she sounded a hundred miles away, a stranger. "It's all over, Dwight. I can't see you anymore."

"Is he there with you? Is he making you say this?"

"No. He's at work."

"Then I'm coming over—"

Her sigh sounded like the ocean at night. "It won't work, Dwight. Let's both be grown-up about this and call it a day."

This was impossible. He could still see Ken's defeated face in the reflected glow of the TV screen. He had won, he knew that.

"He said if it went on, he'd dump me. He means it. I told you I signed a pre-nup when we married. He was smart, he had my lawyers approve it. Now he can leave me high and dry."

"So that's what it comes down to?" he asked, his voice strengthening with his anger. "Money? His father's money?"

"You always put such a negative spin on things. It's not about money—it's the security."

Something he could never give her, he thought. Ken was right again. "That's just a euphemism, Scotty."

"I'm not going to argue semantics."

The silence expanded until it became almost unbearable. Dwight said, pleadingly, "One last drink . . ."

"Dwight—you're not listening. I *can't see you anymore.*"

He took a long walk later that night. He had coffee at an all-night place across from Lincoln Center. The crowds were long gone and the dark complex looked like a necropolis, the sculpture giant puzzles in the pale, marbleized moonlight.

The cops were spinning their wheels with him: Soon they would move on to another possible suspect. He would wait; the secret of life was patience—and tenacity, the single, successive drops of water wearing away a rock.

There was a girl he had noticed a few times in a run-down laundromat across town. She liked to come in by herself after everyone else had left for the night. She would be number five and there would be no way that plodding team of detectives could connect him to her.

He finished his coffee, feeling considerably better. He knew he would get back at Scotty: But he had to wait. Months from now—maybe even a year—he would make her number eight or nine. Why not? Patience paid. . . . ●

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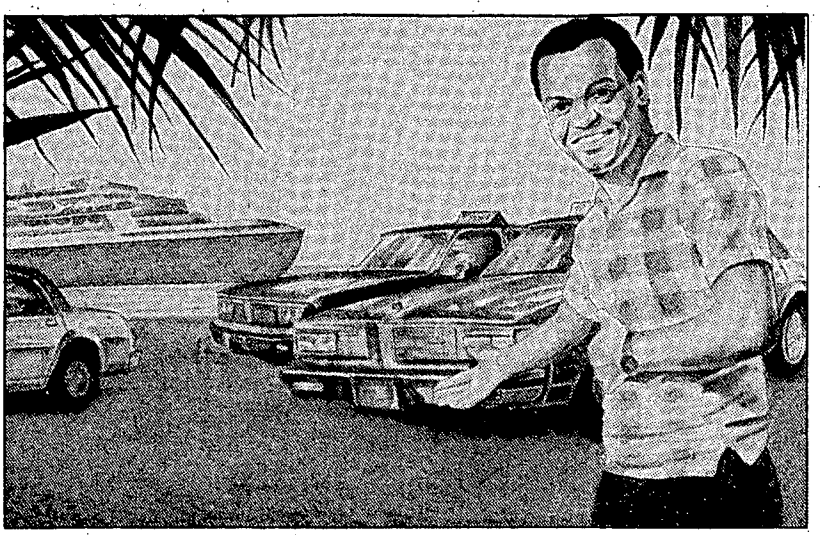

Art by Steve Cavallo

TOURIST TRAP

by Helen Tucker

The sun was just rising when Eddoes finished polishing his car with a soft chamois skin. In the faint orange light, he stood back and, as usual, admired his wheels. Not many of the taxi drivers on the island could afford a car shipped from the States, and they looked at Eddoes enviously. He knew they were wondering where he got the money. The taxi fares were standard: so much to take the tourists to the Cave, so much to the early parishes, so much for a spin around the island. Occasionally, another driver would flat out ask Eddoes how it was that he could afford the car and still have money to burn. When this happened, Eddoes merely smiled enigmatically and said, "Work, man! I work my tail off for my money." Which, of course, was not much of an answer to the question.

The car was a dark green Olds in which Eddoes could seat one passenger in front with him, and although three could occupy the backseat easily, he preferred only two. For that matter, his real

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preference was a couple, man and wife, in the backseat, and no one beside him in front. It was easier to point out the attractions to two than to three or four because there were fewer questions and less arguing about where he should take them next.

Today was going to be an exceptionally good day; Eddoes could feel it in his bones. It was Thursday, so there'd be three cruise ships in. Usually there were at least two in, except Sundays when only one came. Some Sundays he didn't even bother to go to the port; he and God took Sunday off. But some Sundays he did go, rather than stay home and have his mother bug the hell out of him about going to church with her.

But, he supposed, if she wasn't bugging him about going to church, it would be something else. Lately, all her energy and all her mouth (and he didn't know which was greater or more forceful) were going into trying to talk him into marrying Callista. Callista was a pretty, light-skinned girl (which on this island made her of uncertain ancestry—and strange that she was his mother's choice for him) and if he was going to marry anybody, he'd just as soon it be her. But he wasn't ready just yet to take on wife and family; he was too busy making a fortune.

"I'm twenty-six, not forty," he kept telling his old lady. "When I'm ready to marry, I'll marry Callie," he said, adding, "just to please you."

"By the time you ready, she be married to somebody else," was the inevitable response.

He gave the hood of the car one last swipe with the soft cloth and went inside the little four-room house for a leisurely breakfast with his mother. One of these days, they would move to a bigger—much bigger!—house, but not right now or he really would arouse suspicion about where the money came from.

He sat down at the kitchen table and tied into a heaping plate of ham and eggs, pancakes, and toast.

"You going to be the last in line," his mother said, tying a flowered housecoat at the waist before sitting opposite him with nothing but coffee and a piece of toast in front of her. "You prob'ly always the last in line. How you going to make money that way?"

Eddoes laughed, flashing his even, white teeth. "Did I ever come home without money, a lot of money?"

She had no rebuttal to that.

The eager beavers among the taxi drivers got up in the middle of the night and went to the port, some as early as three or four A.M., to get in line so they could be among the first to pick up the pas-

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sengers who disembarked from the ship. Eddoes had learned a long time ago that there was a better, easier way of getting fares.

The first passengers off the ship were always those who had booked a tour through the cruise line, and when they came down the gangplank, they headed straight to the line of tour buses waiting at dockside.

The next ones off were usually those just looking for a ride to the nearest shopping center. Then came little groups, friends traveling together who wanted a van so they could stay together.

Finally, an hour or more after the ship had docked, the group that interested Eddoes came down the gangplank, looking toward the by now diminishing line of taxis. These were the people who didn't want to be rushed out of bed or steered around in a group. This was the real leisure class that wanted to call the shots, do some sightseeing, but at their own convenience.

These were the ones with the most money, who didn't mind paying for extras, and who gave the biggest tips.

Eddoes was always ready for them, standing tall and well dressed (usually dark blue or gray slacks, plaid sport shirt, and shoes as highly polished as the car), black curly hair cropped close to his head, and smile about a yard wide on his dark face as he said, "Good morning! I'm Eddie. Are you looking for a little tour?" And he would point toward the gleaming green Olds.

He finished his breakfast, got up from the table, and bent over and kissed his mother on the cheek, something he rarely did. "Don't worry, Mama. Everything's gonna be hoecake."

It was their private joke. When he was little and had heard people say "okay," he had thought they were saying "hoecake."

His mother shook her head dubiously, but said nothing.

At the door he turned and gave her a little wave, and as he bounded out to the car, the feeling came over him again: This was going to be an extraordinarily good day. He took the little TAXI sign out of the trunk and put it on top of the car.

It was eight-twenty. It would take him fifteen minutes to drive to town, and through town to the port. The first cruise ship was to arrive dockside at seven-thirty, and passengers would be allowed off by eight. He would get in the ever-shortening line of taxis by a quarter to nine, and by nine he should be in the number one spot, laughing to himself at all those dummies who had been curled up uncomfortably in their jitneys for hours trying to sleep.

It was one of those glorious, sun-drenched days — bright blue sky with a few puffy little white clouds that looked like playful

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sheep — that Eddoes was positive one could find only in the Caribbean. That was what brought the tourists here, the weather. They didn't care about the native crafts, the history, the colossal underground waterfall, the relics or ruins. They wanted sunny skies, calm seas, and the opportunity to go home and lord it over less affluent friends who had been left to suffer five-inch snowfalls and icy roads. Since Eddoes had never been off the island, he had to depend on TV to show him the horrors of winter.

He drove slowly toward town—no need to hurry—pretending he was a tourist seeing the place for the first time. The whole island was a botanical paradise. No matter in which direction you looked, there was a bountiful variety of fruit trees, flowers, exotic plants, banana groves, and fields of sugar cane, all surrounded by an azure sea that changed color from minute to minute.

He had learned the names of most of the flowers because there was always some simple, gushing woman in the backseat who seemed to feel that the next turn of the earth on its axis depended upon her knowing what that bee-yoo-tiful red plant over yonder was, and, "Do you think if I cut off a sprig, I could get it to grow in Columbus, Ohio?" or Walla Walla, Washington, or Albany, New York, or wherever the silly bitch happened to be from.

Driving through town was always a pain in the ass, because when a ship was in, traffic and people were snarled and buzzing like a beehive. He took the sea road to the port.

Yep, there she was, the *Reigning Monarch,* a humongous white nine-tiered wedding cake of a ship, leaning against the dock. The gangway was still full of people descending from vessel to land.

Eddoes got in the line of taxis. There were still about fifteen ahead of him, which meant either the ship had been late docking or, for some reason, it had taken longer than usual to clear it through immigration so the passengers could get off. Well, he could wait. He stretched his legs as far as they would go, leaned back against the genuine leather upholstery, and smiled. The other drivers could have the skim milk; he'd wait for the cream at the top.

He didn't have long to wait. The taxis nudged forward at a slow but steady pace, and then he was number one in the line. He knew the man who was directing the people to the taxis and he nodded to him, but quickly looked away because he didn't like the looks of the next passengers: three middle-aged women. Quickly Eddoes motioned to the taxi that had just pulled up behind him to come around. The driver waved and mouthed, "Thanks," at Eddoes as though he had been done a tremendous favor. Eddoes

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laughed. Then he eased his car up behind, because the next passengers were exactly what he wanted, a man and woman.

Jumping out of the car, he gave them his biggest smile. "Good morning! I'm Eddie. Are you looking for a tour of the island?"

The man, not fat but portly, balding, and wearing a purple sport shirt so loud that it screamed, squinted at Eddoes. "How much?"

"Twenty-five dollars apiece for a spin around the island, stopping at all the most interesting attractions."

The man nodded toward the Olds. "Air-conditioned, I suppose."

"Yes, but that will be five dollars extra," Eddoes said. "Apiece."

"Don't quibble about the air conditioning," the woman said. "Either we have it or I'm going back to the ship." She was a tall, large-boned woman with dyed reddish hair, and a square jaw that gave her the look of a bulldog. She was dressed in blue linen slacks and a lighter blue silk blouse. None of that easy-to-pack, wrinkle-resistant synthetic stuff for her. Eddoes noticed a large diamond ring and wedding band of encircling diamonds on one hand and a ring of diamonds and a blue stone that he thought must be a sapphire on the other hand.

Yeah, man! This was going to be one helluva good day!

He opened the right rear door and helped the woman in, then rushed to the other side and opened the door for the man. "Anywhere special you want to go, or do you just want to see the sights?"

"We've never been here before," the man said. "Just take us to see whatever there is to see."

"I want to see some native art," the woman said. "Are there any art shops here?"

"Oh yes," Eddoes said, getting in front. "I'll take you to a studio where you can see it and buy it if you want to."

"What do you want to look at art for?" the man asked. "We've already got so much the house looks like a goddamn museum."

"Clancy, your memory is about the size of your biggest brain cell. Remember, you promised me that I could buy whatever I wanted when we got here."

"Harrumph!" was Clancy's response. Then to Eddoes, in a conspiratorial tone, "I guess women are all the same. Gotta go shopping for *some* damn thing whether they need it or not."

Eddoes laughed appreciatively, then to mollify the woman, "But we can't fuss, can we, when they all have such good taste?"

Now she was the one who said, "Harrumph! I married you, didn't I? What does that say about my taste?"

"Don't start your verbal sparring with me, Edna. Every-

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thing you say just goes in one ear and out the other."

"Too bad there's nothing in between to stop it," she said smugly.

Eddoes kept his chuckle to himself. Perfect! Everything would go as smooth as the silk blouse that covered Edna's big boobs. He looked at the couple through the rearview mirror. Edna was sitting as far as possible on one side of the seat, away from Clancy.

He chose the route through the center of town. "That's the residence of the Governor General over there." He pointed.

"Uh-huh," was the only comment from the backseat, giving Eddoes the idea that maybe they didn't want a lot of jabber with the ride. He didn't say another word until they were outside the town and Edna chirped, "Oooh, look at all that corn. Why are the stalks planted so close together?"

"That's sugar cane, madam, and on the left a banana grove."

"Is there a reason why the bananas were planted upside down?"

"For God's sake, Edna, that's the way they *grow,"* said her all-knowing husband.

"Why do the bananas have those plastic bags over them, Eddie?" Obviously she preferred his explanation to her husband's.

"So insects and birds won't eat the fruit before it's picked," he told them.

"When do we get to the Cave?" Clancy asked. "They told us on the ship not to miss it."

"It's not far from here," Eddoes said, putting the pedal to the metal. He wondered if, when he finally got around to marrying Callie, they would be as argumentative as most of the middle-aged couples he hauled around. On the other hand, the long-married were more interesting (and interested) passengers than the recently married. Just last week he had had a couple of honeymooners in the backseat, and he could have shown them the island abattoir and said, "Welcome to the Grand Hotel," and they wouldn't have known the difference. They were all over each other, had eyes only for each other. He felt like asking them why they hadn't just stayed on the ship in their stateroom.

"We're approaching the botanical garden now," Eddoes told them, "a riot of flowers, and every kind of plant you can imagine." He had written out a spiel a long time ago and memorized it.

"White roses are my favorites," Edna said. "Are there white roses in the garden?" Saying it as though, if there weren't, she didn't give a hoot in hell about seeing the garden, Eddoes thought.

"I couldn't say, madam, but I'm sure there must be. There're hundreds of different kinds of flowers here. Maybe thousands."

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He drove down several of the little roads through the garden, then suggested that they might like to walk down one of the paths so they could see even more of this botanical wonderland.

"Oh no!" Edna said, horrified. "It's much too hot."

Clancy harrumphed in agreement, so Eddoes drove back to the highway. "We're coming to the oldest parish on the island now," he said, reverting to his spiel. "The church, which is eight hundred feet above sea level, was built in the early 1600s. It was destroyed three times by fire and hurricanes and was rebuilt in 1836."

"I wonder if Tweetie Pie misses us," Edna said.

"She better not miss a single meal," Clancy said, "not while I'm paying a sitter fifty dollars a day to stay with her."

Imagine calling your daughter Tweetie Pie, Eddoes thought. If she's over two years old, she's bound to hate the name.

"I doubt if she sings a single note while we're gone," Edna said.

"Don't be stupid. What else can a dumb canary do but sing?"

God save the Queen! That oaf in the backseat was paying somebody fifty dollars a day to babysit a goddamn *canary*. Holy *merde!* The guy must own the Bank of America, not to mention England, France, and the rest of the civilized world.

This was going to be his best day's work in months, maybe ever.

"Would you like to walk around the church, maybe go inside?" he asked. "There's a cemetery behind that dates back to the earliest days of the church."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Edna said. "As I mentioned before, it's too hot for walks."

Why the hell didn't they stay on the air-conditioned ship? Eddoes wondered. But he was glad they hadn't; he was ecstatic that they had decided to take a tour and share their wealth.

He drove on. "We'll be at the Cave shortly," he told them.

There were times when he regretted the way he was making his fortune. Sometimes the people were so agreeable, downright nice, that he almost couldn't go through with it. But then he would stop and think of all the things he wanted in life, and he knew there was no other way to get them. He didn't want to spend the rest of his days hauling dumb tourists around and listening to their lunatic comments. He didn't want to be like the rest of the drivers, pulling up to the dock at four o'clock in the morning, sitting cramped for hours in a beat-up taxi, then spending more hours riding the same roads over and over, and end up at sunset with a few paltry dollars in his fist. He had bigger dreams for his life.

This couple today though, it would almost be a pleasure . . .

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They were arguing again. He didn't know what about, because he had been deep in his own thoughts. She was saying, "But Clancy, he's your brother. If you can't trust him with your business for seven days, who . . ."

"I didn't get where I am today by trusting other people with my business, and that includes my brother. He'd like nothing better than to squeeze me out and take over."

"You're crazy! Harold's a sweet man who's always doing favors . . ."

Eddoes interrupted before the warning shots turned into a fusillade of cannon fire. "The Cave is just ahead. It's the most spectacular sight on the island."

"That's what they said on the ship," Clancy said.

Eddoes drove down an incline and parked under a tree beside a tour bus. There were at least a dozen taxis already parked in the area, as well as three buses and five vans. The drivers either sat in groups talking or were in a snack bar nearby. It would be an hour or more before their fares returned, so this was goof-off time. Eddoes smiled at the thought of a short respite. He could certainly use a cup of coffee, a sweet roll, some conversation that wasn't laced with recriminations, and maybe a little game. He saw his friend Gerald leaning against his van, and he waved. Maybe he and Gerald could find a third and even a fourth for a hand or two; he kept decks of cards in the glove compartment.

"The Cave is phenomenal," he said, beginning the spiel again. "You will see bubbling streams, waterfalls, stalactites, and stalagmites. At the lowest point in the cave you'll see a forty-foot waterfall which cascades into a deep pool. The lighting in there is something special. You'll have a rare experience of sight and sound."

"How do we get there?" Clancy asked.

"See those little tracks beyond that bus? A tram will take you underground."

"Underground!" Edna shrieked. "You mean we have to go *under ground*, beneath the earth?"

"Yes, madam, that's where the waterfall is."

"I can't do it," she said. "It was bad enough thinking about going in a real cave, but *under*ground . . . Never! I have claustrophobia. I'd simply fold up and *die* in a place like that."

"Oh, for God's sake, Edna, this is what we came to see." Clancy was like a volcano that had been building up steam and was now about to blow. "Forget your damn phobias for a few minutes."

"I'm not budging from this taxi."

"Then I'm going in without you."

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Clancy got out of the car and slammed the door.

Ah Christ! Eddoes thought. Now I'll have to sit here with this bitch for an hour trying to keep her entertained.

"It's not very far underground, madam, and it's really something to see. It'll be something to tell your grandchildren about."

"I don't have any grandchildren."

Eddoes, resigned to an hour or longer of pure misery, watched Clancy walk toward the tram, looking back a couple of times as though he thought his wife might be following him. When he got to the tracks and looked back one more time, sure now that she wasn't behind him, he returned to the car. "Is there anything to see here that isn't underground?" he asked Eddoes.

"You might walk a bit down that path," Eddoes told him, pointing to an opening in woods where the tops of trees met, forming a cathedral-like ceiling. "It's very pretty through there, and cool too," he added before the hot-natured Edna could start complaining about the scorching weather.

"I . . . don't know," she said uncertainly. "Maybe I'd better . . ."

"It's cool, and the smell of evergreens and exotic plants is like nothing you've ever experienced before." He was back on the spiel now. "You really should see some of the scenery around the Cave."

"Oh, all right," she said, and before the words were out, Eddoes had jumped out of the car and was opening the door for her.

"Take your time," he told them as they started toward the path.

"We won't be gone long," Edna called.

Eddoes flashed his most brilliant smile and nodded, while thinking, Yeah, that's what I was afraid of.

After they disappeared from view, he walked over to the sprawling tree where Gerald and three or four other drivers were sitting on the ground talking. "Anybody for a quick game?" he asked.

"Naw," Gerald answered while the others shook their heads. "My group will be back in about five or ten minutes. Besides, a quick game don't gimme time to win back my losings."

"Maybe you won't lose," Eddoes said.

"Maybe the sun'll rise in the north tomorrow," said Bimpo, a fat driver with a flattop haircut. "Gerald *always* loses. Anyhow, I got a feeling your fares gonna be right back. Whyn't they go in the Cave?"

Eddoes shrugged. "I think she's in a hurry to get to the shops."

"You the lucky one," Gerald said. "You always get the shoppers. How is that?"

"You just said, it's luck."

"Funny thing." Gerald wouldn't leave it alone. "You always go

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back to the ship empty. Leave 'em in the shopping center every single time."

"Yeah, that's what tourists do, shop, so they can impress the folks back home." Eddoes was ready to change the subject.

"How come most of the ones I get, I have to drive back to the ship, then make the circle and go to the back of the line again?" A driver Eddoes didn't recognize asked the question.

" 'Cause you ain't lucky like Eddoes," Gerald said, giving Eddoes what he thought was a rather curious glance.

He smiled halfheartedly. Were they getting suspicious?

No chance. He was much too careful. "Ah, God," he said, looking up. "Here they come. They must have walked all of fifty feet."

He hurried over to the car to open the door. "Enjoy your walk?"

"Very nice," Clancy said in a disinterested tone, while Edna merely looked at Eddoes briefly and then got in the car. Once settled, she said, "I want to see some native art now."

"That's where I'm taking you next," Eddoes told her. As they left the Cave area, he half turned and asked, "Where you folks from?"

"Illinois," Clancy said. "Near Chicago. You know where that is?"

"Midwest," Eddoes said. They were all alike; they thought the natives were too thick-headed to remember their own names. "Chicago is where the fog comes in on little cat feet."

"How's that?" Clancy asked.

"Nothing," Eddoes said. "Just something I learned in school."

"What in the hell kind of schools do they *have* down here?" Clancy said, sotto voce, but Eddoes heard him and smiled.

"What business you in?" he asked. Right now it was important to establish good communication, friendly communication.

"Manufacturing," Clancy said proudly. "I make small farm machinery. Nothing to compare with the big boys like John Deere, but it's a nice little company. Now that cotton's making such a comeback, we're working on a new type of cotton picker."

"Sounds interesting," Eddoes said. "I'll bet you'd be interested in our new sugar-cane harvester."

"What's that?"

"I'll show you, the next cane field we come to." It was going fine now; easier than he'd anticipated. "You might want to add it to your catalogue. There'd be a big demand for it wherever cane is grown."

"Is this something new?" Clancy, leaning over the front seat, was showing more interest than he had in anything so far.

"Absolutely," Eddoes told him. "Invented by a local man."

"How does it work?"

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"I'll show it to you, let you see for yourself." Better and better, he thought, turning off the highway onto a side road and then onto a one-lane dirt road that ran between two sugar-cane fields.

"I thought you were going to take us to an art shop," Edna said petulantly.

"Just as soon as your husband gets a look at the cane harvester," Eddoes said soothingly. He drove for a mile or more down the dirt road, then stopped. "This is where they're harvesting now."

"I don't see a thing," Clancy said, "just a bumper crop of sugar cane."

Eddoes got out of the car and opened the door on Clancy's side. "If you'll come with me . . ." He pointed to the cane field.

"What? Walk through there? You're crazy, man, it's too thick. You'd need a machete, and it'd be like cutting through a jungle."

"It's only a few feet in. I'll hold the stalks back for you."

Grumbling, Clancy got out of the car, saying to Edna, "You stay here. No need to ruin your clothes too."

Eddoes was already inside the sugar cane, bending the stalks back for Clancy.

"How do you know this is the right place?" Clancy asked. "I don't see or hear anything. You musta made a mistake."

"No, this is the best possible place," Eddoes said. Slowly, he pulled a shiv from his pocket and unsheathed it. Then, clasping the knife firmly in his right hand, he turned suddenly and, with all his strength, stuck it into Clancy's throat, jumping back quickly as blood spurted forth as though a geyser had activated.

Except for a slight gurgling sound, Clancy made no noise as he fell to the ground, a look of surprise and horror on his face. Eddoes wiped the knife on Clancy's purple shirt, put it back in its sheath, and returned it to his pocket. Then he carefully removed the thick wallet from Clancy's pocket and put it in his own, not bothering to check its contents. Next, he took a diamond ring off Clancy's pinky and a Rolex watch off his arm. After turning Clancy over on his stomach so the bloody hole in his neck didn't show, he made his way back through the cane to the car.

"Madam," he said to Edna, "I'm afraid I need your help. Your husband was feeling a little faint and had to sit down. With you on one side of him, I think we can get him back to the car all right."

"Clancy feels faint? What in the world?" Edna's eyes clouded, but Eddoes wasn't sure whether with concern or suspicion. "He's never felt faint since I've known him."

"Must be he's not accustomed to the heat. It gets a little warm

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inside there, because the cane's too thick for a breeze to get in."

Edna followed him slowly through the massive field, complaining every step. "Stupid idea to begin with. You should have taken us straight to the art place. I never . . ." She broke off and gave a little scream as she saw Clancy lying on the ground, the cane flattened under him. "Clancy! What happened to you?" She bent over him.

Eddoes had the knife out in a flash, plunging it into the back of her neck, again getting quickly out of the way as blood gushed forth.

He worked swiftly, removing her rings, earrings, and bangle bracelets. She had no purse with her, so she must have left it in the car. He rushed back to the car and, yes, there it was on the backseat. He took out what money was inside—less than a hundred dollars in cash—put a packet of traveler's checks aside to be burned later (he knew better than to try to unload those things), then took out Clancy's wallet and went through it. Almost four hundred in cash and another wad of traveler's checks. So. He had not quite five hundred dollars and jewelry that should, even at the fence's deflated prices, be worth eight or ten big ones.

He removed all identification from Clancy's wallet and Edna's purse, then threw them as far as he could into the sugar cane. Then he started backing and filling until he had turned the car around in the narrow road, and headed back to the highway. It was a good day's haul . . . and the day was far from over. The sugar cane made a perfect hiding place for the bodies. This was November. The cane would not be harvested until February, and by that time Edna and Clancy would be skeletons.

He drove slowly back toward town, humming to himself, looking through the rearview mirror occasionally to see if any of the other drivers he knew were behind him, but there was no one. Something about the way Gerald had looked at him today when he said, "You always go back to the ship empty," made Eddoes wonder if Gerald and some of the others were getting suspicious. But no, why should they? Most of the women tourists ended up in the stores after tours, dragging their husbands along with them.

No need for him to worry; everything was hoecake.

The town was teeming with traffic and people, causing Eddoes to inch along to the street that led to the port. It was nearly noon and the second cruise ship had been in for two hours. He would be hitting it just about right now. The bus tours would have left.

He went around the traffic circle, exiting at the ramp for Pier No. 2, then took his place in the line of taxis waiting to pick up passengers disembarking from the *Queen of the Sea.* ●

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Art by John Stevens

SOLDIER TO THE QUEEN

by Jeremiah Healy

1.

The knock from the corridor was so soft, I couldn't be sure it was on my door. When I said "Come in," though, the wooden frame with "JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS" on the pebbled glass swung toward me.

The woman behind it peeked in, then looked at the stenciling on the glass, as if I'd offered her my identification and she was trying to be sure I was the genuine article. Black, short, and heavyset, she appeared to be about forty, but the extra pounds bulged her features as well as the summery print dress, so if someone had suggested she was five years to either side, I wouldn't have bet against it.

The woman said, "Mr. Cuddy?"

I stood up. "Yes?"

"My name's Georgina Newell. I maybe have a problem you

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could help me with?"

She said it as a question, a lilt of the Old South in her voice despite the fact that we were standing less than a hundred feet from, and thirty feet above, Boston Common. The name rang a vague bell inside my head. "Please, come in."

Newell came all the way through the door, closing it behind her before moving daintily to one of the two client chairs in front of my desk. The almost mincing walk came from the tiny feet and slim ankles, I think, the small bones giving me the impression that she hadn't always carried the same weight, but had gotten used to it.

One of Jeremiah Healy's greatest talents as a writer is his ability to create atmosphere, to allow readers to feel both the physical layout of his chosen locale and the social distinctions that separate the characters who live in it. In "Soldier to the Queen," Mr. Healy's series character, John Francis Cuddy, private investigator, is in his native Boston, on a case the police have been warned off. ¶

Sitting down, Newell said, "It's about my boy, Jameson," and reached inside her handbag, fishing around until she came out with a hankie. Not crying yet, but seeming pretty sure she would be soon.

I made the connection. "Your son was driving for Luna McTeague."

A vigorous nod, the hankie dabbing one eye, then another. "Jammy was how I call him, account of when he a little boy, he love strawberry jam on his bread."

The incident had been all over the news the week before. McTeague came from Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, a black, female rock singer just starting to hit the charts. Her regular driver cum bodyguard was on vacation when McTeague got attacked by two masked men in an apparent kidnap attempt. Jameson — Jammy — Newell pulled a gun, wounding one of the men but getting shot himself. McTeague was unhurt, the two men escaped, and Newell arrived dead at the hospital.

His mother said, "This here is a picture of my boy. His yearbook one from the high school."

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I took the photo even though I'd already seen it, flashed over the heads of somber news anchors every time a soundbite on the case had run. Bright smile and happy eyes, black hair almost shaved in a basic-training style. I held the photo longer than necessary to make Mrs. Newell feel better, as though her son were still a part of current life and not just recent history.

"Luna, she been real good about everything, good as she can be. Paying for the funeral and all last week, calling me on the telephone, asking me how I was doing."

"Have you heard much from the police?"

Newell finished with the hankie, at least for now. "They been on the phone to me, too. This one lieutenant, Mr. Murphy, he say you might be somebody I can talk to."

Robert Murphy worked homicide, the only black in the unit. "What is it you'd like me to do, Mrs. Newell?"

"My Jammy, he working for Luna—I know her mama from Rox' when I first move up here—and he just so happy. He know Luna, too, four years behind her in school. Kind of a puppy love for her, always seem to me. But my Jammy, ever since he a little one, he want to be in the army. Only he get ready to graduate the high school and he go up to the recruitment office, and they say he can't, account of he got this bad knee from football. He wasn't no big boy, my Jammy, just good hands, you know what I'm saying? Wide receiver, caught three touchdowns his senior year."

I hated to bring her back from the memories. "How did your son come to drive for Ms. McTeague?"

"Well, she was between gigs—I think that's what you call it—like taking some vacation before she start on the road again? And so her driver, he take his vacation, too, and she telephone to me, ask if my Jammy can kind of fill in."

"Your son have any experience doing that?"

"He have his license over two years now, ever since he seventeen."

"I mean experience driving for someone, acting like a bodyguard."

Newell shook her head, raising the hankie again. "He wasn't supposed to be no bodyguard. Was just supposed to drive her around, run and get her stuff she need so she enjoy her vacation."

Gently, I said, "Did your son usually carry a gun?"

Emphatic shake of the head this time. "Nossir. No, my Jammy never carry no gun, never join up with no gang. Never look for no trouble from nobody."

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"Mrs. Newell, what is it you want me to do?"

"Mr. Murphy, he say maybe I could hire you? Maybe you could poke around some, find out the peoples kill my boy."

That sounded off. Homicide cops, especially good ones like Murphy, don't want or need private investigators mucking up their cases. "What do you think I can do that the police can't?"

Newell clutched her hankie as if it were a rosary. "Mr. Cuddy, you got any children?"

"No."

"Ever been married yourself?"

I thought of Beth and said, "Not for a while."

"Your wife, she run out on you like my man did on me?"

"She died. Cancer."

I thought that might stop Newell, but it didn't even slow her down. "Well, when my man run out on me, he leave me pregnant with my Jammy. I raise that boy from nothing with nothing, and now somebody gone and take him away from me forever. I want those peoples caught and brought to the court and put in jail for the rest of their lives. That's what I want, and I'm sitting here ready to pay you for doing it."

I had to admire her, but admiration wasn't a very solid basis for taking on a client. "Mrs. Newell, I could spend a long time backtracking over what the police've already done. I can't guarantee I'll find something they missed."

"I know that. But there got to be some reason Mr. Murphy tell me to come see you. I can read mens, and I read him, and you the same way. You not the kind to cheat me."

She was right about Murphy, and, I hoped, right about me, too. "You have any idea why your son was carrying a gun?"

A sorrowful shrug. "Like I say, he want to be a soldier, and he just about worship Luna, you'd think she was some kind of queen. His puppy love wasn't nothing but respectful, though. Like them bees."

"Bees?"

"You know, from the TV last month, downtown?"

Got it. In late May, a colony of honeybees was flying through the financial district, God knows why. Some bee expert was interviewed about it on the news broadcasts, saying a downdraft of air from the skyscrapers pushed the bees onto the street. The passing vehicles crushed some of them, including the queen, firefighters having to hose the bodies off the asphalt.

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Newell said, "My Jammy, he was just like them bees. They won't leave their queen, even though she dead. The bee man, he try to scoop them up in his box, save them from the cars. But they don't care, them bees. Nossir. They like my Jammy with Luna, soldiers to their queen."

The hankie had to go back to work.

A few years ago, the department moved all the homicide detectives from headquarters on Berkeley Street to an old building in South Boston, about a mile from where I grew up. I knocked on the blue door with the blue and white HOMICIDE UNIT sign. A female voice I recognized said, "Come on in, we're always open."

Beyond the door, a woman with brown hair and broad shoulders was sitting in a padded swivel chair, doodling on a notepad. A blocky black man in a hound's-tooth suit stood next to her.

I said, "The two of you at once, an embarrassment of riches."

Sergeant Bonnie Cross looked up at Murphy. "Cuddy's here. What a treat."

Murphy spoke to her. "You want to open a window?"

She watched me. "We airing the place out, or you thinking of jumping?"

I closed the door behind me. "Glad to see I can still inspire."

Murphy dragged over a second swivel chair for him to use. "What's on your mind, Cuddy?"

I angled one of the straight-backs for conversation and eased into it. "Had a visit this morning from Georgina Newell."

Murphy nodded. I looked toward Cross, and Murphy nodded again, so I figured it was all right to continue in front of her.

"I guess I was wondering how you came to recommend she see me."

Cross handed a file to Murphy before he had to motion for it. Spreading the manilla folder on his knees, he said, "Got the call from the uniforms who responded. They did what they could to preserve the crime scene, take down witnesses."

He wasn't exactly answering my question, but I didn't want to interrupt until I saw where he was going.

"Back Bay, Boylston Street near Arlington. Wednesday last, ten in the A.M. Lots of closed-up stores along there, so the traffic was light. Couple of ways to escape in a vehicle, too. Jameson Newell was driving Ms. McTeague east on Boylston when she asked him to stop and double-park, she wanted to look in the window of the

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Women's Industrial Union there, arts and crafts and things."

I glanced at Cross. "Convenient of her."

Cross shrugged. "Says she does that a lot, one of the reasons she likes to have a driver taking her around. Says she never thought about it being a habit somebody might use against her."

Murphy went back to the file. "According to three sober, neutral witnesses, a sedan pulls up and blocks her car—a pink Cadillac, she did a remake of the song couple years back. Masked man exits the sedan's passenger side and goes after McTeague, wearing gloves but holding a white cloth in one hand. He's grabbing for her as the driver comes out, also masked and gloved. By this time Jammy—that's the dead boy's nickname—"

"I know."

"By this time Jammy's up and out of the Caddy. The masked driver goes to take him barehanded, and Jammy produces a firearm and shoots, taking the guy somewhere up top."

I said, "Somewhere?"

Cross coughed. "One of the witnesses says left shoulder, another says right arm, and the third says between the eyes."

"Consistency's not always a virtue."

"Lieutenant said they were sober and neutral. That doesn't make them reliable."

"Descriptions of the guys?"

Cross smiled without showing any teeth. "Five-six to six-five, one-fifty to two-fifty."

Enough of that. "The papers gave me the impression Newell didn't have a permit to carry."

Murphy nodded "The papers were right."

"What happened next?"

"When the masked driver goes down, the other guy, the one after McTeague, drops the white cloth and pulls a piece of his own. He lets fly three shots from a combat stance, dropping Jammy. By this time, there's a good deal of diving for cover going on in the general vicinity, but everybody agrees Ms. McTeague yelled, 'Jammy, no.'"

"In response to Newell being shot."

"That's right."

"Funny all three neutral witnesses should recognize such an odd name."

Cross said, "They got to hear it a lot, but that's getting ahead of ourselves." She looked back to Murphy.

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Murphy returned to the file. "The masked shooter runs over to his partner, yelling something about him being hit."

"Exact words?"

Cross said, "Take your pick. We have three flavors, surprise, surprise."

I went back to Murphy. "What then?"

"McTeague starts screaming and runs over to Jammy, who's bleeding onto the blacktop. The masked shooter gets his driver into the sedan, taking the wheel himself and nailing it. At this point, he either takes a right onto Arlington toward the South End—"

"—or goes straight on Boylston in the general direction of Portugal," said Cross, shaking her head.

"You get a make on the vehicle?"

Murphy looked up from the file. "Could have been a brown Chevy, a blue Mercury, or—I like this—a black Jag'."

"The white cloth still at the scene?"

"Lab came back positive for chloroform."

"But McTeague never got put under."

Cross said, "No, she just cradled Newell's head in her lap, crying out his name over and over—"

"—how the witnesses all got that right—"

"—and saying, 'Why'd you have to do that, Jammy, why'd you have to try for?' "

I said, "The chloroform makes it look right."

Murphy's eyes got hooded. "Does, doesn't it?"

I stayed with Cross. "Any prior attempts?"

She shook her head. "McTeague says not, and we never got any calls about one."

"Why would you?"

"She lives in one of those high-rises at the Prudential Center."

I stopped. "That's only five, six blocks from where she gets out of her car, right?"

Murphy said, "That's right."

"So why does she take a car someplace she can window-shop on foot?"

"Good question."

"And why does the attempt happen when her regular guy is on vacation?"

"Better question. We're trying to talk with the guy, Dennis Giordano, but both McTeague and his brother say he's backpacking somewhere the hell and gone in Maine."

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"Giordano's brother?"

"Yeah," said Murphy. "His name's Rick."

"There a way I can talk to Rick?"

"Expect there is. He's bodyguarding McTeague now."

I stopped again. "Now, but not while Jammy Newell was filling in."

"That's right."

"There some reason Rick couldn't sub for Dennis originally instead of them bringing Newell into the picture?"

Cross said, "Not that persuades us."

Which brought me back to the question Murphy hadn't answered. "Why did you send Mrs. Newell to me?"

The big black hands closed the file like a hymnbook. "After we started on things, Commissioner got some calls from concerned politicians over in Rox', Mattapan, and other African-American—what's the polite word now, 'enclaves'?"

"I like that. I grew up in an Irish-American enclave myself, though I can't say I knew it at the time."

Murphy both ignored me and spoke to me at the same time. "These politicians were very concerned. Account of the Chuck Stuart case here and O.J. out in the land of La, they were afraid that the big bad Homicide Unit was going to put their native daughter through the official ringer after what she'd suffered already."

Cross said, "Emotionally and psychically speaking, that is."

I looked from one to the other. "So the word rolling downhill from Berkeley Street is . . ."

"Look for the bad folks, don't harass the good ones."

They both watched me.

"So I get to harass the good folks."

Neither said anything.

"There anybody else I should know about?"

Murphy handed the file back to Cross. "We got a list in there of the witnesses' names and addresses, you want to run those down. Do us a favor, though. Copy the list in your own handwriting."

No paper trail from their side. "Thanks, Lieutenant."

He said, "There's one more guy you ought to talk to."

"Who's that?"

"McTeague's manager. Name of Manny Kantrowitz, Park Plaza building."

Cross said, "You can go see him, or you can just wait here a while. He calls in every ten minutes or so to yell at us."

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I laid the roses diagonally across her grave, the blooms pointing raggedly toward a wrecked dinghy on the shoreline rocks of the harbor below.

It's been awhile, John.

"Too long, Beth." I was embarrassed to realize the only reason I was there then was because of already being in Southie at the Homicide Unit.

You brought me roses to apologize?

"I brought you roses because they're the best."

And so are you, John Cuddy.

"I'll have to be."

What do you mean?

I told her about Mrs. Newell, and the shootings, and what Murphy and Cross had said to me.

A pause after I was finished. *Sounds depressing.*

"Murder tends to be."

No. What I meant was, even if you find out an insider had something to do with it, won't that hit Jammy's mother even harder?

"Probably, but that might be what she's asked me to do."

Another pause. *I'm glad I was never in your line of work, John.*

Glancing down at the wrecked dinghy, I rearranged the roses without noticeable improvement.

2.

Luna McTeague's apartment building had a private garage that gave onto Exeter Street and a muscular doorman who sat behind a curving gray console on the first floor. Her name got him to telephone up to her, and Georgina Newell's name got me waved to the bank of elevators.

The unit was on the fifteenth floor, a door opening to my right as soon as I stepped off the elevator. I was pretty sure it wasn't McTeague who came out into the hall, though, because the person was a white male, about six feet, one-ninety, and twenty-eight or so. Oh, and angry. Very angry.

"You can just get back on and ride back down, man."

I walked toward him. "I don't think so."

He didn't wait for my arrival. Instead he came barreling at me, the walls of the corridor about eight feet wide, or two feet too wide for what he had in mind. Shifting my whole body, I feinted right, then came in low and under his chest, using the backs of my hands as lifts for his knees. He went ass over teakettle and landed

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behind me with that satisfying whooshing sound that meant it would be all he could do to breathe for a minute or two.

I turned around and bent over him. "I'm guessing you're Rick."

"He is."

I turned back. The woman who was half in the doorway looked a lot like her shots on TV. In person, McTeague stood about five-six in bare, toenail-painted feet. She wore stirrup pants under a billowy peasant blouse and geometric earrings over that. Her complexion would remind you of honey, her hair a shade darker except for some blond streaking here and there that could have come from either the gene pool or a Clairol bottle. Prominent nose and lips, jutting chin made for defying a microphone, brooding eyes that looked as though they'd spent almost as much time crying as Georgina Newell's.

She said, "Is Rick all right?"

"Ask him."

McTeague watched me. "Rick? You okay, man?"

Giordano grunted something.

McTeague watched me some more. "Can you help him back into the apartment?"

"Probably."

I bent back over Giordano, but my hand was shoved away. He got to his elbows, then his knees, the joints kicking in one pair at a time. When his ankles didn't wobble too much, the man used them to get himself past me and past McTeague and back into the apartment. I had a feeling he'd be heading to the porcelain facility, and when I joined McTeague in the living room, Giordano was nowhere to be seen.

"Have a seat," she said.

There were plenty to choose from. Burlapy sectional furniture filled the place, each piece arranged to give a different view of the Cambridge skyline on the other side of the Charles River. The coffee and end tables were marble over brass, a vase of long-stemmed roses picking up a minor color of the sectionals. Issues of *Variety, Billboard,* and other industry magazines lay scattered over every horizontal surface. The carpeting was thick enough to hide mice.

McTeague took a seat five feet across from me, folding one leg under her as she sat down. "Why did Georgina Newell hire you?"

"She thought I might be able to help the police find her son's killer."

"Yeah, but why you in particular?"

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"I came recommended."

While McTeague worked on that, I noticed a framed photo on one of the end tables. It showed her with an arm around the waist of an apelike guy maybe thirty-five years old, both of them in bathing suits. McTeague looked better in clothes than a bikini, and the guy looked like an older version of the departed Rick.

I said, "That Dennis?"

She turned, then turned back. "Yes. If he'd been there, none of this would have happened."

"Meaning?"

"Jammy wouldn't be . . . dead."

"But wouldn't the rest of it have still gone down, with you maybe held for ransom somewhere?"

McTeague stared at me. "No. Dennis would have figured out how to stop them, without getting himself killed."

"Anything like this happen before?"

"No. Like I told the police."

"Then why was Jammy carrying a gun?"

McTeague lost the staring contest. "I don't know. He was real serious about the job, asking Dennis all about driving me around."

"I thought he was subbing for Dennis."

"He was, but that's what I mean. Jammy wanted to come over and learn everything ahead of time, before Dennis took off and he had to start driving me himself." She seemed to look inward. "Maybe Jammy sensed something the first couple days, maybe somebody watching us or following us. But he never said a word to me about it, and he sure never said he was carrying a gun."

Reaching for a tissue, she seemed sincere.

I said, "Ms. McTeague, you've never gotten any kind of threat?"

Shake of the head as she used the tissue.

"Letter, phone call, overeager fan?"

McTeague waved with her free hand. "No. You can ask Manny Kantrowitz about that, you don't believe me. He's my manager."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"When, that day?"

"Yes."

She took another swipe at her eyes with the tissue, then made both hands go to her lap, like she was punishing them. "Jammy was just driving me to a recording studio we were thinking about using for my next CD. I got to feel right in a place I'm going to sing, and I wanted to see it before Manny cut the deal. We're

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going along Boylston, and we slow down for a car coming out of a space, and I see this doll in the window of the store there, so I tell Jammy to pull over."

"Into the space?"

"Huh?"

"Into the space that the other car just left?"

"Oh. Oh, no. There was, like, another car, waiting on it. So Jammy just double-parked, and I got out and walked toward the store. I heard some brakes squeal, and I turned around, like you do, you know?"

I said I did.

"And then all of a sudden there's this dude coming at me in a black mask—ski mask, with gloves, and he's got this white rag, aiming for my face."

She brought the tissue back into play.

I said, "Did you get any sense of him?"

"Yes. The rag smelled like chemicals."

"No, I mean *sense* of him. Young, old . . ."

"No."

"Black, white?"

A firmer set of the jaw. "No. All's I could see was his eyes."

"No skin around the eye holes?"

"No."

"The mouth?"

Jaw firmer still. "I said no."

Okay. "Then what?"

"Then I heard a shot. And I thought they shot Jammy, account of I didn't know he had a gun. So I hollered at them, screamed at them, 'Jammy! No, no!' "

"Go on."

"Then the man after me, he turns around and pulls out this big gun and shoots at Jammy, and he . . . he . . ."

I gave her a moment. "Did you hear anybody say anything?"

Through some sniffling, she said, "The one who shot Jammy was saying something to his friend, like 'Hey, you okay, man?' Like that."

"Those the exact words?"

"I don't know. I was worried about Jammy."

"The voice, did it sound young or old?"

"I don't know."

"White or—"

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"Look, I told you, I don't know. I was almost hysterical, all right?"

"Ms. McTeague, why'd you call Jammy to drive for you?"

"Because Dennis was going on vacation. I was on vacation, just finished three months of one-nighters." She paused. "Gigs, you know?"

"Yes, but why Jammy in particular?"

McTeague didn't seem to like me mimicking her earlier question. "Account of I knew him, from the old neighborhood. He was a good boy, not into drugs or nothing. I figured I could trust him to drive the car and not crash it on me."

"Why not call Rick instead, have him fill in for his brother."

"Because Rick's a hotshot, saw Kevin Costner in *The Bodyguard* too many times. I had him work with Dennis once last year, and he nearly broke a dude's arm when the dude just wanted an autograph."

"Like out in the hallway with me."

She nodded. "What I'm saying."

"How much longer will you be on vacation?"

A wariness. "Why?"

"I was just wondering when we could expect Dennis back."

"He's supposed to be back on Friday, account of I have this gig at the Orpheum Saturday. But I'm not gonna make it."

"Make what?"

"The gig. I'm just too . . . too . . ." She got a new tissue.

3.

The wooden plaque screwed into the doorframe said EMANUEL KANTROWITZ, MUSICAL AGENT. It didn't look as though it was the first plaque to be attached to the office. I knocked and got a "Yeah, yeah."

Inside, a dumpy, fiftyish man with a ridiculous toupee looked up at me. He was standing behind a desk heaped high with paperwork. There was a telephone receiver pressed to his right ear, the free left hand flicking at his other ear, waving me in as if he was annoyed by a bug. The toupee looked enough like a small, sleeping animal that the bug could have been a flea.

Into the receiver he said, "Yeah, yeah, I know all that, but what do you want from me? . . . Harry, she witnessed a murder. . . . Look, she knew the kid, Harry. He was on the payroll, and he's gunned down like from your desk to the coffee machine, how's she supposed to feel?"

I looked around the office. Framed concert posters, one or two

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groups I'd vaguely heard of, a stunning one of Luna McTeague implying intimacy with a hand mike.

"Gimme a break, all right? . . . Well, you guys think about that open date in September, maybe the one in early October. . . . Right, right. . . . Okay."

Hanging up, he drew his hand down his face like the old actor doing the slow burn, then said, "And what's your problem?"

I showed him my ID, tried not to let him catch me staring at the rug on his head. "I'd like to ask you a few questions on behalf of Georgina Newell."

"Who . . . ? Oh, right, right. The mother." He exhaled harshly. "Sure, sure. Why not?"

I sat in a chair whose padding had long ago gone flat. Kantrowitz sank back into its desk-chair mate.

"A tragedy," he said. "A real tragedy."

"Did you know Jammy Newell?"

"Just to say hello to. He'd only been driving her like a week, and he was only gonna be around another week, till Dennis got back. You know who Dennis is?"

"Her bodyguard."

"That's what his brother'd like to call it. No, Luna's trending right now, but she's not stratospheric yet. That's why it's such a tragedy."

Kantrowitz was losing me. "How do you mean?"

"This gig at the Orpheum. That was them on the phone just now. Had to cancel and beg them to reschedule. Took me two years to get that date. Now at least they're hot to trot with her."

"Because of the shooting?"

"Because of the notoriety. The flash, the sizzle. You name me another rocker's been in the public eye—print or broadcast—without a drug bust or suicide attempt being the trigger. No, this'll put Luna on the moon, but—"

Kantrowitz stopped cold, then picked up a pencil and scratched on a notepad.

"Mr. Kantro—"

He held up his other hand, finished writing, and dropped the pencil from the other. "'Luna on the moon,' get it?"

"I do now."

"You think of something like that, even accidental, you got to write it down, get it to the publicity people, see can they use it somehow."

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"They feel Ms. McTeague's going to really make it?"

"Truth is, you never know. I been in this business thirty-one years. Thirty-*one*. I go back to Diana Ross, Dionne, even Tina Turner the first time around. Luna's got the voice, but a hundred girls a year got the voice. Her body's not world-class, but she's got good moves on stage, can sell you the song even when you're not in the market. But she's been building a long time, and that's not so good in this business. Ain't room for too many if they haven't hit it big by twenty-five, and Luna's almost that now."

"So salting the mine wouldn't hurt, publicity-wise."

"Salting the . . . ? The hell you talking about?"

"There're some aspects of the attempt that make it look a little like a publicity stunt."

"Publicity stunt? What do you want from me? Didn't I just get finished telling you that I had to cancel the Orpheum because Luna's too upset to go on? She had the place nearly sold out, her biggest single venue yet, and she's gonna do something to queer that, and then, *then,* tell me she's gotta cancel because the kid's death freaked her out? Gimme a break."

Manny Kantrowitz waved me out of his office, this time not as if he was just flicking at a bug.

4.

The kid leaned against his rake, grateful to me for pulling him away from the landscape contractor who watched us from a woodchipper, feeding it branches like logs into a sawmill. "Hey, like, is it really cool to be a private eye?"

"Sometimes," but I had the feeling this wouldn't be one of them. He was maybe sixteen. White, skinny, and dense as a post. He wore a Grateful Dead T-shirt and blue jeans with a tear through the knee that looked carefully executed. His name was Tommy.

"You know, like the rock opera, man."

"The Who."

"I thought you looked the right age, man." He stuck out his chest. "The coolest of the cool was the Dead, though, right?"

Jerry Garcia's obit went through my mind as the woodchipper screeched thirty feet away. "Tommy, that day on Boylston Street?"

"Oh, right. Man, it was extreme. I was on my way up to Tower Records on Newbury, buy some fresh tracks. They're re-releasing all these cool sounds now on CD's. They didn't have those back when you were a kid, right?"

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"Not even cassettes."

"You're kidding?"

"No. That day?"

"Oh, yeah. Right. Awesome action."

Tommy gave me the same sequence I'd gotten from Murphy and Luna McTeague. "Only thing was the gunfire sounded bogus."

"Bogus?"

"Yeah. It wasn't like on TV, man, the 'boom, boom.' It was more crackle, like, from both guns."

"That's the way real gunfire sounds in the open air."

"Oh. Bummer."

The combination of Tommy and the woodchipper was giving me a headache. "Could you hear anybody say anything?"

"Yeah, I heard the mask who shot the kid yell over to his friend, 'Hey, man, you hurt or what?'"

"Exact words?"

"Close, but I didn't, like, write them down or anything."

"You get a sense of the voice?"

"A sense of it?"

"Yes. Young, old?"

"Older than me. A guy, not like a kid's voice."

"How about black or white."

"Black."

"You're sure?"

A shrug. "Everybody else was."

"Everybody else was sure?"

Tommy looked at me. "No, man. Everybody else was black."

She gestured back toward a woman in a reclined chair with a lot of equipment arrayed around it. "You realize you're pulling me away from a perm?"

I leaned my elbows on the reception counter. "I'll try not to take too much of your time."

"Can't it wait?"

"Maybe not. I'm here about the shootings you witnessed on Boylston."

"Honestly." She said it as a curse, kind of quaintly for someone still in her twenties. About five feet tall and tubby, she wore a green smock on top and spandex legwarmers down below. Her hair was orange, a buzz-cut around the ears and a Friar Tuck tonsure above them. I wouldn't have let her near my own hair

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if it was on fire and she had a bucket of water.

The nametag on the smock read ALICE. "Can you tell me what you saw that day?"

Same sequence.

"How about what was said, Alice?"

"The black singer, she was just screaming. The guy who shot her driver, he was yelling over to his partner."

"What did he yell?"

"I think it was 'Man, you hit?' but Caribbean-like."

"Caribbean?"

"Yeah. The guy's voice, I mean. He said 'man' like it was 'mon.'"

"'Mon.'"

"Yeah, like, 'Hey, mon, welcome to the islands,' you know?"

"Did the shooter sound black or white to you?"

"Hey, who am I to say? All I do is cut hair, which if you don't mind . . ."

Alice waddled back to the perm.

"I'll be with you in a moment, sir."

"Take your time."

The store manager was in his forties. Sports coat, tie, and starched white shirt. He carefully slid printer paper, file folders, and a box of marking pens into the stationery bag for his female customer. They said goodbye using first names. His was Warren.

"Now, how can I help you?"

"I'm looking into the shootings you witnessed last week."

He closed his eyes. "I hope never to witness anything like it again."

"Can you tell me what you saw?"

The eyes opened again. "Yes. I was on my way to the bank, so unfortunately I had a perfect view of it, not diagonally, the way it would have been through the store windows here."

Warren went through the same scenario as Tommy and Alice.

"Did you hear anything said?"

He frowned. "Well, the young black lady was really upset, calling out the name 'Jammy' over and over again. The killer — the one in the mask who shot the young black man — was more concerned about his confederate, though, and said something to him like, 'Man oh man, you okay?'"

"Exact words?"

"I doubt it. It all happened so fast, really. I didn't get a good look

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at anything. Probably didn't see any more than the blind man."

"The blind man?"

"Yes." Warren came out from behind the counter and crossed to the store window. "Let me . . . no, I don't see . . . wait a minute, yes. Yes, there he is."

I followed his pointing finger.

5.

The man sat against the exterior wall of an abandoned optometry shop, red-tipped white cane next to him, worn running shoes with new, glary laces on his feet. The hiking shorts had things hanging past the button-flaps, and his L. L. Bean T-shirt was stained where you might drop food on the way to your mouth. Amber sunglasses were secured by a surfer-boy, braided neckstring connected to each template behind the ear and running down his back. He'd tilted a Red Sox baseball cap enough to show his hairline, mostly gray at age sixty or so.

As I walked up to him, he rattled the quarters in a pewter mug by his right thigh, their clinking muffled a little by the two singles someone, or he himself, had put into it. I folded a five and slipped it down with the other bills.

A grin, eight or ten teeth missing. "Thank you, sir, and have yourself a better day."

"Thanks. I'm hoping you can make it that way."

The grin faltered a bit. "I don't want any trouble."

I squatted down on my haunches so our faces were at the same level. "I'm not offering any. Just like to ask you a few questions."

"No, I can't see light or fire."

I stopped.

He said, "That's usually the first question, can I make out light or fire. I can't."

"I'm not so interested in that."

He cocked his head. "Then what do you want?"

"I'm a private investigator, looking into the shootings on the street last week. I understand you were here then."

No way to read the eyes behind the lenses, even if they were capable of betraying emotions. "You think anybody in a courtroom'd take my version of what happened seriously?"

"I don't know, but I would."

After a few seconds, he stuck out his hand. "Vince Krushevski."

I shook with him. "John Cuddy."

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"What do you want to know?"

"Your version, as you heard it."

"Okay." Krushevski seemed to square his shoulders against the building. "I'm sitting here, some kind of optometry shop's gone under, right?"

"Or moved, maybe."

"No matter, helps with the subliminal guilt, you know? If I was crippled, I'd be outside a sporting goods store, especially if I could find one that's closed. No legs, even the tennis racquets and baseball bats have run away from me."

"No sight, a deserted eyeglass place."

"Now you got it. Anyway, I'm sitting here, and it's a slow morning. Nobody's talking back to me, so I ease off the patter for a while and just relax. A car pulls up, normal-like, and the door opens and closes. Woman's voice, black but educated — I'm figuring you want this kind of detail, right?"

"That's right."

A nod. "Then I hear some brakes on lock-up, and I wait for the thump."

"Of the car hitting something."

"Right. Only I just hear another couple doors open and close on the new car, the one with the brakes. A guy comes running toward the black woman, street shoes but he sounded . . . I don't know, athletic, crisp-like, a man moving fast and sure. She yells, 'What are you doing?' then she screams, 'Jammy, no. Don't.' Then there's a shot, and—"

"Wait a minute. No shot before she screams about Jammy?"

"Uh-unh. Her first, then the shot. Well, actually the first shot, which I hear whump into somebody, and somebody goes down. Then I hear the athletic guy moving quick, then firing three times, more running, and — understand, the black woman's screaming her head off through all this and I've got people hitting the deck all around me."

"I understand."

"Okay, then the athletic guy says, 'Monk, you hit, man?' and goes—"

"Hold it. The shooter said, 'Monk'?"

"Yeah."

"Any accent?"

"What do you mean?"

"Caribbean, maybe?"

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Krushevski laughed. "No. No accent. Sounded just like you or me."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning white male, Boston or at least around here somewhere."

"Go on."

"Well, I hear the doors on the brakes-car again, and the black woman sort of stumbles over toward the car she got out of, screaming 'Jammy, Jammy, no, no. Why'd you do it, Jammy,' over and over."

"'Why'd you do it, Jammy.'"

"Yeah, but it was more . . . chantlike almost, like she was saying a prayer for him."

Krushevski let that sit between us.

I said, "Anything else?"

"Just other voices, somebody yelling to call the cops, somebody else calling for a doctor, this one saying I got a cellular phone, and like that."

"The police talk to you?"

"Yeah, one guy did."

"What'd he say?"

"Just, 'Move along now. There's nothing for you to see.'"

Vince Krushevski gave me another gap-toothed grin. I slipped a twenty into one of the flapped pockets, not trusting the pewter mug to passersby who might be tempted to make the wrong kind of change.

I thought about what I'd seen and been told. It was thin, but it was the only explanation that covered all the facts. For insurance, I made a phone call. The party who answered seemed pretty impatient but also knew the nickname.

Then I walked to my old Honda Prelude and drove it the three blocks to Exeter Street, stationing myself so I could watch the garage exit. If I was wrong, he'd stay there with her all night. If I was right, he wouldn't.

I was right.

About four A.M., a blue Ford came up the ramp, the lamppost throwing just enough light for me to recognize the man behind the wheel. He drove north, Route 1 to 128 to the town of Rockport, forty miles above the city on Cape Ann. I followed him to a small house five or six blocks up from the water, where he parked and went inside.

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Leaving my car on the street, I moved up to the house, finding a window opened to catch the sea breeze. I could hear a conversation, and I looked in the window long enough to confirm what the voices implied.

Then I made my way back to my car and aimed it south.

The muscular man had just come on duty behind the curving console. He told me Luna McTeague wasn't in; he'd just seen her go out. He remembered me, though, and said he was pretty sure where she was going, given what she was carrying and all.

It wasn't quite as nice as Beth's hillside across town. The grass was mowed, but this cemetery didn't seem able to keep up with the broken beer bottles and used condoms and other trash that people threw in there. The pink Cadillac stood out like metallic cotton candy against the long, gray ranks of the headstones. I parked behind it and got out. The air was quiet except for a robin chirping from a nearby tree.

McTeague bent over the recent grave, no piece of marble or granite yet marking the spot. As I approached, she pulled a long-stemmed flower from a bouquet. Roses, maybe the ones in the vase back at her apartment. She seemed to be arranging them in a pattern over the dusty earth, three still left in her hand.

When McTeague looked up, she didn't seem surprised, as though we met like this every day and she'd just begun wondering what could be keeping me. "You know, don't you?"

"Most of it."

McTeague looked back down at the grave. "He was still like a little kid, stars in his eyes about getting to drive for me."

"Which was one of the reasons you picked him, right? You and Dennis."

She blew out a breath. "We had it planned just right, you know? Him on vacation, me on vacation, the gig coming up at the Orpheum. Dennis and Rick just block in my Caddy by that store, and Rick makes like to kidnap me, the rag with the chloroform to drop on the street, prove it's the real thing. Dennis, he knows Jammy'll try to do something, but he's just going to punch Jammy out, make that part look real, too."

I said, "And they'd take you to the house somebody rented blind up in Rockport, and you'd manage to 'escape' before the concert and bravely volunteer to go on. The heroine holding Jammy's hand for effect at the press conference, the media applying the full

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court press, Dennis and Rick and maybe a platoon of other guys there to provide security against a second 'threat.'"

"Dennis wasn't even carrying a gun, no need to, and he didn't know Rick had one. I didn't know, either, all the good that does now."

"But after the kidnapping went sour, you had to cancel the Orpheum concert, because Dennis is sitting in the house in Rockport, nursing a wound that wasn't life-threatening but would have been pretty obvious to everybody if he'd tried to show up at the concert with you."

A nod, barely. "That's right."

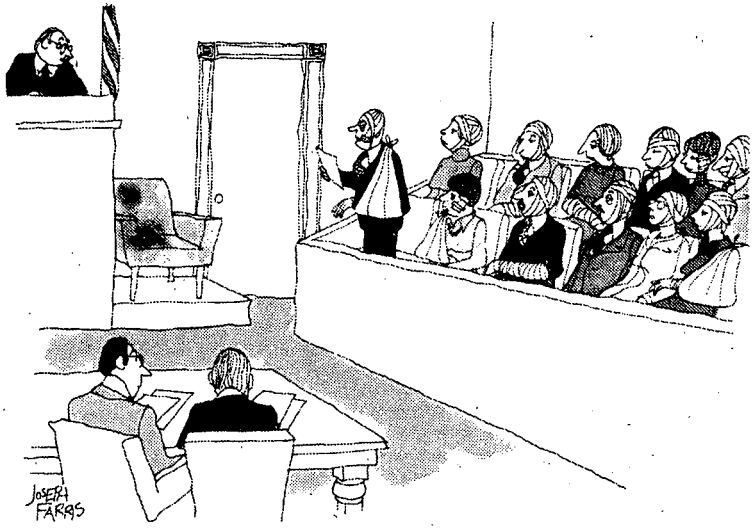
I thought back to the photo of McTeague with Dennis Giordano, looking like an ape, and my phone call to Manny Kantrowitz about the nickname. "Was Rick the only one who called his brother 'Monk'?"

Same kind of nod, acknowledgment more than agreement. "Yeah. Dennis didn't even like him using it around me. You know, black people and monkeys and all."

After a minute, I said, "We probably ought to be going."

She didn't ask where, just gestured with the roses. "I want to put these three on, too."

Luna McTeague genuflected to do it, the queen's last wreath at the tomb of her known and faithful soldier. ●



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PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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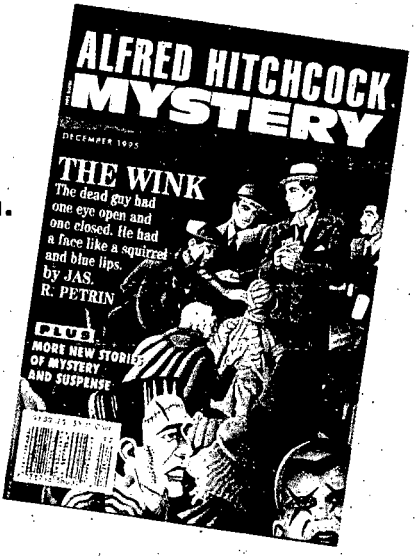
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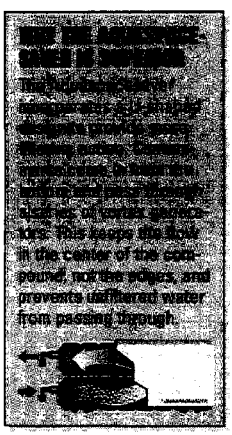
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